

## Exposure to the Tantric Path



### Background Information:

*These stories are biographical narrations by the author, written down around 20 years ago. This was originally meant to be published as a book, but after completing the first eight chapters, the author chose not to continue, and thus we are left with the stories in their present incomplete form. Most of these stories took place around 1970. The areas discussed in these stories have changed greatly in the last 40 years and may not match what we see today. All of these stories are factual. There is no plan to ever publish this book, so if you want to know more, or if you want to know about other events that occurred, you would have to meet the author personally.*

### Chapter One

In that little town under the foothills of the western ghat in Kerala, there was just one real building which was a small temple with a tile roofing. The temple was surrounded by huts and shanties. When I arrived, there was a competition going on in the market place between two tantrics who had selected an onlooker from the crowd to be their medium. They had him standing stiff as a bamboo in trance. One tantric pointed a stick at him and said "lay down" he fell flat! The other pointed and said "get up" he rose up straight without bending a limb!

A thing about six inches long made from flour which had loose hay for hands and feet with half an egg each for it's eyes and a knot of real hair stuck on the top was lying on the ground nearby. One of the tantrics recited an incantation and the thing rose up and started moving towards him, rocking back and forth on its own, moving its hay legs sideward.

This town was near the famous Durga temple-town Chottanikkara (where midnight tantric rituals are conducted treating hundreds of haunted people). This used to be a kind of show by the local tantric voodoo priests. They will put up a small challenge to the competitor and usually they meet in front of some old temple in an empty ground. The names of competitors will be announced in the local market place, community bathing lake, and in the temples. So there will be two or three villages gathered around for the fete. About 200 people will be there, and the priests don't have any stage or microphones or anything like that. They just start shouting at each other and the people will stand in a circle. I was just sitting back in fear. I heard some of them murmuring, "When these things start to happen it means it is getting dangerous." One of the tantrics cuts the tongue of the medium with a gross looking blade, there is blood all over. He covers the medium with a blanket and starts screaming out some questions to him, while going in front of different people in the audience. The questions are like what is the color of shirt this man is wearing, what vegetable this lady has in her bag, where is this old man coming from etc. The tongue cut medium screams back answers from under the blanket. Then the other tantric sticks the tongue back in its place, but now the guy cannot talk! In the zeal to outdo one another tantrics call more people out of the crowd. asking them to perform as mediums. No one comes forward fearing that they may possibly perform injurious acts.

Finally, to the relief of everyone they declare a draw to the challenge and announce that they will meet everyone again on another date. The crowd broke up. I walked around the little bazaar near the temple. There I saw one of the tantrics going from stall to stall. This is a weekly kind of market there. There is no building or anything like that, people will come, may be spread a mat or spread a long blanket and then they will put their things on and start selling, while shouting loudly the prices. It will go till sunset time in the evening. Just before they close, the local criminals will come and collect their tax. After they left, everyone was afraid of this magician who went around collecting his toll. After he left I asked some of the shop keepers why they allowed this to go on. One man says if I don't give he will change all these vegetable into creatures. He said, "He can make snakes fall from the sky". Another said anything may happen, this man has no heart. He can do what he likes and no policeman will dare touch him. A third man told me he will change the color of my wife's skin. He has chatan (a type of spirit) working for him. Chatan is derived from the Sanskrit word chetana or consciousness. Whether there is a relationship between this name and the Arabic saitan or Hebru's Satan is a question for etymologists.

I was eager to get to the bottom of what I have seen and heard. Without wasting more time in the bazaar I headed for the woods outside the village. At the end of a long paddy field in the eucalyptus woods is where I was told I will find the tantric showman's residence. After a time consuming hike through the thick village I finally reached the place. The small shelter in the middle of the clearance was assembled with crude wood, with a cut rock that deemed the roof and the 'hut' was built under a banyan tree. The roof was not full because one could stand up and see part of the tree where one side there was no or very little roof (rock). It had all around animal bones and human skulls and hair and all kinds of disgusting paraphernalia.

A charming, fair skinned, young lady sat just inside the doorway, if you call it a doorway, that was again a broken side of a wall. She was not yet 20 and looked fresh and virgin. Her hair was worn long, half wet and loose. She had on a simple ankle length maroon red gown which had a long open neck in the front, revealing her flesh.. There was a vacant look in her eyes that did not change when I spoke to her. Asked about the man I was looking for she slowly mumbled, "please wait he said he would come" which really didn't tell me what I wanted to know . I replaced the question and got the same reply!. Now like a recorded message repeated over and over I could see that she was under some kind of influence. Curiously , I slowly landed my palm on her right cheek, I was right, she didn't seem to know that I was touching her. Every couple of minutes, she slowly moved her head down a bit, like a newsreader. There was a bewitching smile on her lips too.

I sat down outside the stone shelter. I heard someone moving through the forest. A man stepped into the clearing and I recognized him as the tantric I have seen demanding goods in the village market. Now he didn't look so wild eyed or fearsome. In fact it could have been any common fellow from the street, a rickshaw-driver for instance. Still one could see in his face a strange sort of controlling mood. Not that of a gross sensual lusty person. But someone who had some lust for power. One might say he had the same sort of air about him as a very successful business man – a mixture of ruthless ambition and a cocky confidence. But his success was not in business it was in the black arts. Soundless, he led me into his hut.

The foreside of its dark disjointed interior was taken up by a stove that was simply an arrangement of bricks housing a wood fire. Upon that squatted an oversized copper kettle with two earlike handles on either side. Steam spewed out from under the jug, filling my nose with a stomach unsettling odor. Just a bit short of disgusting and causing me to throw up. Against the other two walls were a flat stone with a highly polished mirror-like surface, a small book case with a thick bundle of palm leaves crowding the shelves and an old, half broken harmonium. In the other corner I saw more of the now familiar rice flour "figures" chilling in their combined morbidity and childishness. As I walked in stooping, my head brushed against bones tied with knots of hair hanging from the timber rafters above. With the stove's fire he lit a couple of candles and we sat down.

By this time it was getting dark. Nervously I began explaining myself, and my new found interest in Tantra. He gazed at me steadily with a cold thin smile until I broke in, in haste, “Can you teach me? Do you think I can learn from you?”

Then he asked in a deadly calm voice, “That job is mine, but tell me, how far do you want to go?” A scary giggle followed his question.

“To tell you the truth, my real interest is to develop faith in spiritual things by actually seeing something like this”.

“Did you see the show I did today”, he asked , maintaining his reptilian smile.

“Oh yes it was very impressive. How do you perform such feats?”

He thoughtfully stared at me for a moment. Then he replied, “I can tell you where you can get a little deeper look into the mystery of Shakti, (power). This will be a sort of test for you. But it will have noting to do with me. I will tell you where to go and give you some advice in preparation. But you will be on your own after that. I have selected a venue very close to the house of your Muslim friend.” It was bewildering to me how he knew about my Muslim friend.

“If what you see convinces you that this is not parlor magic, you may return here for some serious instruction. Are you interested?” I nodded eagerly – I was very interested. He told me about a small Muslim settlement near a stand of trees known by the name Chavuk, similar to Pine. In the midst of Chavuk woods was a clearing. I was to go to that clearing on the next full moon night and sit and simply watch for something to appear.

“Don’t fall asleep whatever you do. You should bring with you a pocket full of small white stones – if you get frightened spit on these stones one at a time and throw them behind you as far as you can and then run. This will help you to get away. Try this encounter , then you may return here”.

I left in no small state of excitement eager for the next full moon night. The afternoon before the full moon night I returned to the region with my Muslim friend. We soon found the little village, that the tantric had told me about and made discrete enquiries about the chavuk forest. Around sundown we located it. Just in case we might need some help, my friend made a quick acquaintance with a Muslim family living some 100 meters across the road that skirted the edge of the trees. These people confirmed that certainly there could be danger and told us they would keep the lamp burning in the window so that we could find our way there easily. We had our pockets full of white stones.

After some hours of killing time in the village we returned about 11 o'clock in the night and entered the woods. The moon was high in the cloudless night sky flooding everything with its pale shine. After a brief walk down a gentle incline we came to an area where some trees had been felled. In the midst of the clearing we saw a broken circular wall that rimmed an old well.

We sat down on a fallen trunk some 20 meters away from it not knowing what to expect .Our attention was drawn to each and every rustle of the woods. For long time nothing happened. Finally after midnight my friend nodded into sleep. I remembered the tantrics warning and remained alert. My back to the well and my gaze moving like a searchlight along the line of trees all around. You could hear every single turn of breeze that was going through the thin leaves of those chavuk trees.

Ten minutes after my friend fell asleep, I trembled, as a cold tingle crept up my spine. Leaping to my feet and turning around I saw something that made my heart almost stop. Bathed in the moon shine a tall statuesque women stood on the well's rim. I was sure she didn't walk to that place because I was watching. Her eyes were closed. For a moment I wondered if she was a sleepwalker. In face and physique she did not resemble an Indian woman . She had a long loose hair that hung down over the front of her body to her knees – otherwise, she was naked. She was hauntingly voluptuous in a way that was both enticing and frightening.

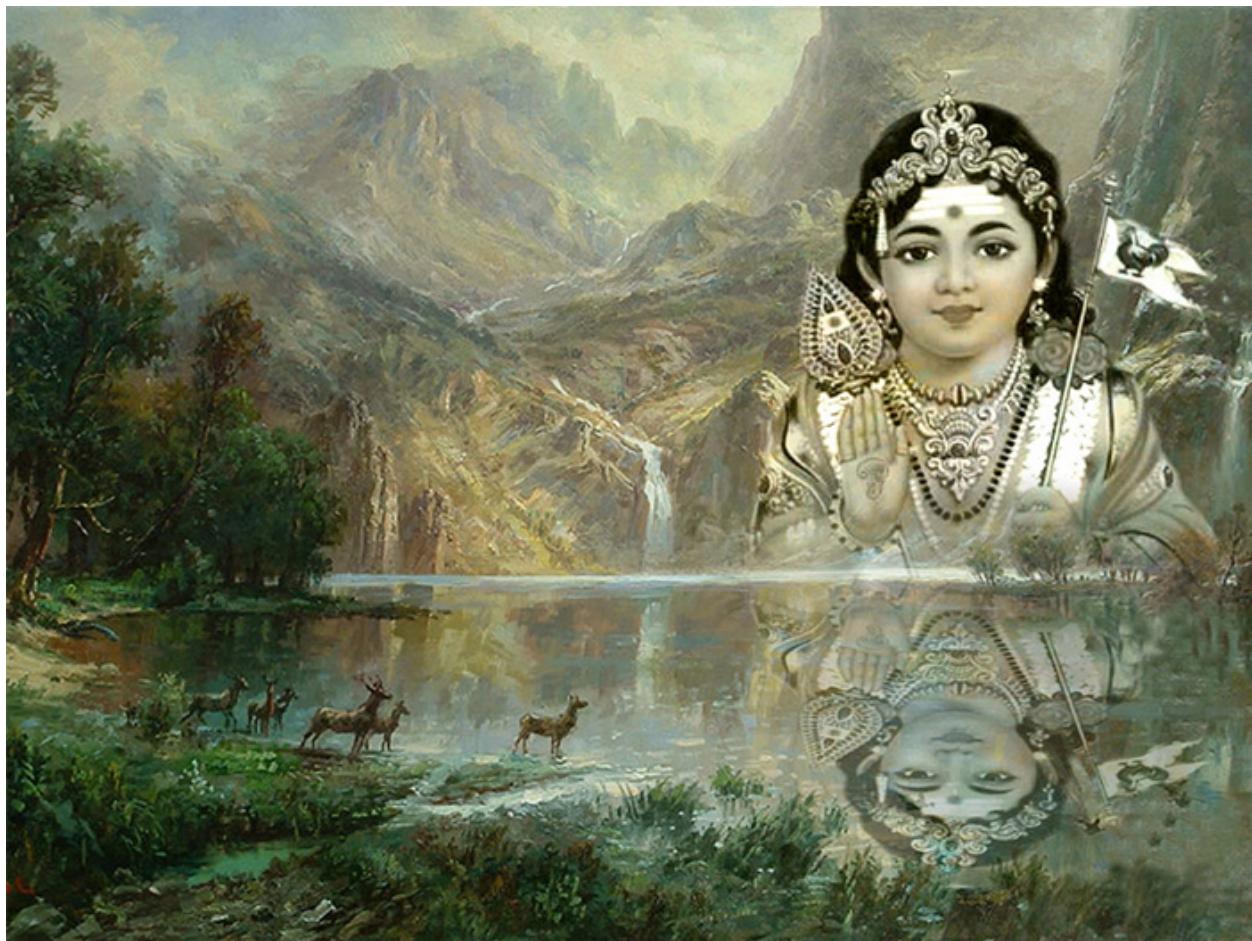
Staring open mouthed at this apparition I nudged my sleeping friend with my foot. He sat up with a shock, turned to see what I was looking at, then gasped and scrambled to his feet. At once her eyelids lifted revealing twin orbs from hell to penetrate the darkness with a glare like the eyes of a tigress. She fixed those terrible eyes upon mine and stepped off the well alighting to earth as if she was not heavier than a wisp of cotton. The woman's legs propelled her forward. I cannot say she walked or ran or floated for these words will not simply be able to give you an accurate picture as how she advanced upon us. Her legs moved without bending at the knees making swift little steps of such fluid effortlessness that I was reminded of the locomotion of a centipede. It was almost as if below the waist her body was motorized for when her legs started her head and upper torso with her limbs snapped back slightly from the sudden forward motion at least to our vision.

My friend shaking violently and gibbering caught my hand and tried to pull me with him in a dash for the road. But I was rooted to the spot transfixed by the mysterious eyes of the women. I tried to tell him I couldn't run but no sound would come from my contracted throat. He left me and fled for his life just as she halved her distance from us. What deadly hypnotic power an automobile's head lights will have over a deer standing in gaze on it's path – her eyes had over me. She closed the last few feet between us and I heard my friend shout from behind me "get ready to run!" something flashed through the air and landed behind the woman. She broke off her mesmerizing stare and turned to see what it was. As soon as she looked away I regained

control of myself. I bolted in sheer terror to catch up with my friend who was now in the woods on his way up to the road. He turned took something from his mouth and threw it past my head. It was then that I remembered the stones! Still running like a mad man I fumbled in my pocket and pulled one out. Popped it in my mouth for an instance then passed it over my shoulder without looking back.

Hearts pounding we burst out of the groove, crossed the road and entered the field at full tilt on our way to the Muslim's house. I turned and saw the woman emerge from the trees and skitter over the road right behind us. An awful thought crossed my mind – that's it! we will never make it. Slow into a stumble I plunged my hand in my pocket to snatch a whole fistful of stones. I licked them ravenously before hurling the lot right at her, then sped off again at full speed. Looking over my shoulder I saw her stoop to examine some of the stones, picking them up one by one. but as if in sudden fury she flung them down again and rose to resume her pursuit.

By this time we had reached the house. We entered breathlessly and bolted the door behind us. A man and his old mother came out of another room and made us to sit down as they quickly drew the blinds on all the windows. That done, the man handed my friend and I each a large shiny bladed knife. He rubbed some limestone paste on the sides of the blades and told us to hold the knives ready. In the mean time the old lady read aloud from the holy Koran. Whoever or whatever the mysterious woman was, she did not try to enter the house. After an hour or so the man and his mother retired. My friend and I still trembling with fright did not dare drop into sleep before the first rays of dawn.



## Chapter Two

When we met again, the tantra master was much more forthcoming. I was greeted with a warm embrace and invited to relax under the banyan tree. I sensed that I now belonged. In an awed voice I asked him, “What was it that I saw?”

He chuckled at my neophyte’s excitement. “So, you were impressed?” I nodded. “You saw Mohini, a demoness from the underworld. Had you known how, you could have entered a pact with her for the next cycle of Jupiter (twelve years). You promise to satisfy her lust once a month, and she will do your bidding in return – protect your property, destroy your enemies, whatever.

“But a pact with Mohini is very dangerous. When she comes for sexual satisfaction, she may assume eighteen forms in the course of the night, expecting you to fulfill the demands of each one. If you cannot, it will cost you your life. And if during the twelve years of your relationship

with her you have an attraction to another woman, that will also cost you your life. You suddenly vomit blood – finished.”

I asked, “Why was she attracted to the white stones?”

“Mohini draws energy from the male sexual fluid,” he answered. “Besides the pleasure of sex, this is her main interest. Of the bodily fluids, saliva is the most similar to semen; that’s why throwing a white stone upon which you’ve spat is a sure way to divert her attention. People who drool while sleeping unknowingly invite this kind of succubus to take control of their bodies.”

Looking at me appraisingly, he then asked, “Has your faith in the occult increased?” I swallowed and blurted, “Yes, how could it not? I’ll never forget that experience as long as I live!”

“So, you want to learn something from me?”

“Yes, of course!”

He devised a schedule of appointments based on my days off from work. On the average I would see him once every two weeks, but sometimes he insisted that our meetings be separated by as much as forty days, in deference to his own obligations. He ordered me to keep my relationship with him a strict secret.

During our meetings he taught theory, reading and explaining Sanskrit verses to me from a old book. In the course of these lessons, I learned he had twelve chatans under his control. He engaged these demons in grisly tasks for paying customers, such as frightening or inducing insanity in the customers’ rivals, or even killing them.

I also learned that my master had taken up vamamarga in vengeance against people who had used the same methods to hurt his family. He destroyed these enemies and then went into business for himself. In India, vamamarga has always been the last resort of the downtrodden in securing justice and getting respect: ‘Dog as a devil deified, deified lived as a god.’

Apart from my master’s ruthlessness, I found some things in him that were admirable. One was that he was strictly self-controlled, despite the fact that he used women in many of his rituals. He was a rare man who was motivated not by sensual pleasure but by sheer power.

Another good quality of his, fortunately for me, was that once he was your friend, he would not betray you. Many tantric masters accept disciples simply because they need assistants, not

because they want to impart knowledge. Since in tantra today's disciple may become tomorrow's rival, a master's students can find themselves in grave danger when he no longer needs them. But my master accepted me as a friend, knowing that I would not seriously pursue tantra later on. I was only experimenting.

For the last ten years he'd been attempting to get mystic powers by a method known as *uttara-kaula*: the worship of *Shakti* in the form of a virgin girl with particularly fine *lakshanas* (physical qualities). His *chatans* would search for such beauties as he traveled around Kerala doing his magical exhibitions.

From time to time he would place one of these women under hypnotic control and bring her to a burning ground, where bodies are cremated. There he would bathe her in liquor and invoke the power of the goddess with mantras and mudras (symbolic hand gestures). Yet during all this he had to remain completely unperturbed by sexual desires (he'd been celibate for the last thirty years). After the ceremony he let the girl go home untouched, unharmed and unable to remember what had happened.

Having completed theory, one night I assisted him in a particularly gruesome ritual. He took me to a crematorium where he had the cooperation of the man who burned the bodies. This man had pulled from the fire a smoldering half-burned carcass that we used as a kind of altar. My master sat down near the body in meditation. I had a box containing eight different powders; on signal from my master, I would sprinkle one of them on the hot, crackling corpse. The other fellow would place burning cinders on the body from time to time to keep it hot.

The powders produced different colors and flavors of smoke. With the rising of each puff from off the carcass my mind would be opened to a particular realm of thought. For instance, one powder caused thoughts of clear skies to flood my mind – the dawn sky, noon sky, sunset sky and night sky. With another I saw different kinds of clouds. Visions of bodies of water were induced by a third. Sometimes the visions were horrible, as when I saw mounds of different kinds of stool, and sometimes they were very sensual. In all cases, I had to keep my mind under control and not allow it to be overwhelmed by fascination, lust or revulsion.

I was being used by my master as a 'video monitor' for his own meditations. I was to sustain the images in my head undisturbed while he entered them with his mind. Each image was a door to a particular level of consciousness, and at each level he had to propitiate a particular form of *Devi*.

This ritual meditation went on until about an hour before sunrise. Finally he stood up and embraced me, saying, "With your help, tonight I was successful. What a mind you have!"

He explained that he had long attempted to complete this ceremony, but because of not having a suitable assistant, he'd never seen it through to the end. Now, he told me, he'd attained the power to render objects – including his own body – invisible, as well as reproduce them in multiple forms.

Such powers are called siddhis, and are obtained by yogis after long, arduous austerity and meditation that might stretch over a succession of many lifetimes. Yoga slowly opens by increments the chakras, the hidden power points of the mind.

But the tantric process, when successful, places the mind of the meditator under such intense pressure that the siddhi-chakras can be abruptly wrenched wide by a mighty burst of willpower. This is precisely why tantric ritualism combines such explosively contradictory elements as the vow of celibacy with the bathing of nude girls in liquor. This is also why tantra is so dangerous, for its forcible distortion of the mind often ends in insanity.

Likewise hazardous is the congress the tantrics have with chatans, mohinis and similar evil spirits. As an old saying goes, 'Mahouts die by elephants, snake charmers die by snakes, and tantrics die by the entities they summon and attempt to control.'

After the session in the burning ground, my master told me not to visit him again. "You have seen enough to have faith in the realm beyond the senses. If you are intelligent, you will take up a proper religious life. This path is only for wild men like me."

And in fact my faith was greatly reinforced by my master's help. I concluded that if such displays of power as he could effect were possible through the dark practices of left-hand tantra, the miracles attributed to the Krishna murti at Guruvayur must be of an infinitely more sublime and pure nature.

During the period I was learning from my master, I visited other tantrics. There were two in particular who became the main reasons why I took heed of my master's warning to abandon vamamarga. I didn't want to become like them.

The first, who directed me to the second, was a woman who was reputed to be the most adept tantric in all of Kerala. She sometimes stayed in a ruined house in a village outside of Trichur. It was only with great difficulty that I managed to find her there as she was very secretive about her movements. It was rumored that she was wanted by the law, so I dared not make open inquiries about her for fear of being arrested as an accomplice.

When I came to the house, I saw nothing indicating recent habitation except for an old ragged quilt flung in a heap on the veranda. After looking around a bit and finding no one, I picked up a corner of the quilt to see what was beneath it. The cloth was snatched from my touch as a voice hissed from under it, “Don’t touch my blanket! If you want to see me, come back after sunset!”

Shocked beyond words, I recoiled from the quilt as if I had suddenly seen a scorpion in its folds. I went into the village and had dinner in a small eatery. As the sun sank below the horizon, I returned to the old house.

As I mounted the veranda, the figure under the blanket stirred and sat up. Her face gave me yet another shock, for it was decrepit beyond belief and covered with infected running sores. Her hideous visage reminded me of a reoccurring nightmare I’d had as a child, in which a hag much like her peered from beneath a staircase of an old building.

But fascination for her reputed abilities overrode my loathing. As she was physically unable to stand (she moved about with the help of people over whom she had power), I sat down next to her. In a rheumy, quavering voice she said, “If sunlight touches my skin, I will die. That’s why you can only see me after dark.”

I tried to introduce myself, but she cut me off. “I know you and know why you’ve come, but I do not deal with beginners. You are looking for drastic displays of power that will give you faith in the mystic realm. Very well; I have thousands of tantrics working under me, and I will recommend one to you who will more than satisfy your curiosity. And I guarantee – after you’ve met him, you will not want to become a tantric yourself.”

She told me to go back to the village and spend the night there. The next morning I would see a line of people boarding a bus. “You give the driver two rupees. Where he tells you to get down, you get down. From this veranda I will direct you the rest of the way. Now go.”

Everything transpired as she said it would. Around noon I got off the bus at a Muslim village where the main business seemed to be the sale of deep-fried plantain chips. From there I walked, following a footpath out of town and through a green field of tall grain. At the end of the field I saw a house perched atop a rocky knoll. Somehow I knew that was the place I was supposed to go.

On the veranda of the house were four young, pretty women in red dresses, each wearing her hair tied in a long pony tail; they were arrayed on either side of a flamboyantly-dressed man sporting a full beard and shoulder-length hair. He looked for all the world like a gangster, and I began to wonder if I’d stumbled upon a house of ill repute. The five sat in chairs as if they were expecting

someone. As I came up the front steps to join them, I saw the veranda was also host to a large population of pet animals – cats, dogs, monkeys, and even a jackal.

“So, you’ve come!” the man welcomed me heartily. “And you want to see something interesting. Well,” he gave me a toothy grin from within his beard, “you must see the performance we have planned for this evening. But until then, make yourself comfortable.” He introduced his female companions and hinted that they would be as friendly as I might like them to be. I modestly declined their assistance in passing the time, for I was by now curious to find out what sort of discipline this man was following.

His specialty was spying on people and locating lost objects by means of mystic sight. And to attain his power, he performed the most obscene rituals imaginable. That night I would be witness to one.

He told me that his line of tantra required no vows or austerities like those maintained by my master. In fact, he knew all about my master and his trust in me; this, he avowed, was the only reason why I’d been permitted to meet the old lady who had directed me to him.

He said more about her. “Her greed for power knows no limit. She has attained levels that no one else can master, and she still wants more. Her physical disabilities are the result of the terrible methods she has used to get where she is now – but that doesn’t matter to her, because her satisfaction is not in the pleasures of the body. To be truthful, she cannot be satisfied. The secrets of the universe are unending, and she has set her mind on fathoming them all. Her goal is to swallow the universe.”

Tantrics consider the siddhi they call ‘swallowing (internalizing) the universe’ to be the summit of attainment: one has access to anything in the cosmos, on any planet, anywhere, simply by thinking about it. Thus all desires are fulfilled by the mind alone.

Yogis who know this mystic process can mentally move through the regions of the universe as easily as someone using an elevator can move from floor to floor in a building. The yogi’s elevator shaft is his body’s central psychic channel, which runs through the length of his spinal cord. By meditation he can link this channel to the shishumara-chakra, an astral tube coiling from the Pole Star down to the nether regions, and project his subtle mental body through it for an easy journey to other planets. He may even teleport the elements of his physical body through the channel, reassemble them in the place of his choice, and so seem to appear there out of nowhere.

Shortly before midnight, the tantric gave me a battered tin box to carry and led me to a nearby burning ground, where the body of a pregnant woman had been saved from the fire for his use. I watched in growing horror as he stood on the corpse and recited mantras. Using a special instrument he took from the box, he removed the fetus from the womb of the dead woman. Examining the tiny limp form, he assured me it was still undead, though beyond hope of revival. He'd kept the soul within the body by a magic spell, he claimed. He pulled a razor-sharp knife and a large jar half-full of some solution from the box, and then, chanting more mantras, he began to butcher the baby, dropping the pieces of flesh into the jar. Aghast and trembling, I fled the scene.

I went to the watchman who had let us into the burning ground. "How can you permit this?" I raged. "That woman's family paid you people to consign her body to the flames, and you're allowing such evil things to be done to her and her baby!"

The watchman cautioned me in a frightened whisper. "Don't say anything more, please! That man knows what you're speaking to me now. Don't make him angry! You must be very careful with him – he even knows your thoughts. If you don't like what he's doing, why have you come here with him?"

Feeling ashamed of myself, I mumbled, "I only wanted to see the secrets of his power..."

The watchman shook his head in pity and said, "Your curiosity will ruin you. You're a young man, you look well-bred and intelligent, why are you getting mixed up in this? Just leave. Don't spoil your life." But I couldn't leave, as I didn't know where to go. One does not stumble around the Kerala countryside at night, for snakebite is a likely consequence. I settled down near the watchman's campfire and soon dozed off.

Some time later – it could have been one or two hours – the watchman roused me. The tantric had come out of the burning ground carrying the jar under one arm. In the other hand he held the baby's skull. "Why did you leave?" he admonished me, not unkindly. "If you want to do things that other people cannot do, you have to do things that other people cannot do!" He laughed, and his easy manner stupefied me.

"Look at this!" he exulted, thrusting the jar under my nose. I thought he would unscrew the lid, and my gorge rose. But he only wanted to explain that by treating the baby's flesh in the solution he'd made a powerful ointment. He reproved me again for not having stayed and watched how he'd done it. In the darkness the jar looked empty to me.

“Go get the box,” he ordered. “We’ll go back to my place and tomorrow I’ll show you what this preparation can do.” He led me through the fields back to his house. Inside, he went to bed with two of his girls. I slept fitfully on the veranda.

The next morning he set the jar down on a small table between us. Now I could see that the bottom was covered by a pasty substance. With a hand caressing the shoulder of a girl on either side of him, he leaned back in his seat and probed my mind for a moment with a quiet stare. “I think you ought to test the power of this ointment,” he said, raising his eyebrows allusively. “There’s a problem at your factory that you can solve with it … some missing cash?”

He was right. A considerable sum of cash funds had disappeared recently, and suspicion had fallen upon a Mr. Murthi, though no proof could be found against him. The tantric smeared a bit of the ointment on my thumbnail and told me to look carefully at it. As I concentrated, I saw in the nail the image of the office from which the money had been taken. I found I could alter the view with directions given in my mind, just as a TV studio director changes the image on the video screen by telling the cameraman to pan, zoom in for a close-up, and so on. But my mystic thumbnail scope was incredibly more versatile, for it even showed the past.

I saw that it was not Mr. Murthi, but another man who had entered the office surreptitiously to take the briefcase of money and hide it in his car. I followed him after work; he drove to the place of an accomplice and stashed the briefcase with him. The accomplice spent the money on black-market gold so that the cash could not be traced. And I saw how the thief had his share of the gold made into doorknobs that he placed on the doors in his home, naturally without telling his family what they were really made of.

Later I tipped off a friend at work who wrote an anonymous note to the police. They verified that the doorknobs in the man’s home were solid gold. He was arrested and convicted on charges of grand larceny.

From my further discussions with him that day, I learned that when people came to the tantric for the recovery of stolen or lost property, for a fee he had one of his girls trace the missing goods with the mystic thumbnail scope. The existence of the ghastly ointment was kept secret, of course. The customers thought it was the power of the girls themselves.

The thumbnail scope had its limitations. Though it could penetrate any closed door or wall, it could not see above or below a specific height or depth, nor look into powerful holy places or temples and could be baffled by expert singers performing certain melodies. Certain kinds of smoke would likewise render it ineffective.

I asked him about his karma. “You have attained this siddhi by very obnoxious methods. What do you think lies in wait for you in future births?”

On this point he was surprisingly philosophical. “Those who would master this knowledge must be ready to face the consequences without flinching. I will surely have to suffer for all the black deeds I have done. But that’s part of the game we play.

“We tantrics view all existence as an ebb and flow of Shakti. We connect with that power, and it sweeps us up to untold heights. Later on, the same power may plunge us into despair. But what else is there? Everything is but a manifestation of Shakti.”

This man’s question – ‘But what else is there?’ – for which the tantrics have no answer, bothered me. If there was really nothing else beyond the goddess and her power, then he, and the old witch on the veranda, and my master who poured liquor over women’s bodies, and the brahmin who broke coconuts on his head, had attained all there is to attain. I couldn’t accept that. There had to be something more.

I was now not interested in going any further with vamamarga. But I thought that the theoretical principles and the basic discipline I’d learnt from my master were of great use to me. I had no inkling that once the lid of the Pandora’s box of occult mind power had been pried off, it was not so easy to close again.

Question: If they had attained everything, then why were they still striving for more by those processes mentioned?

The Gate of Dreams: Tantrics of Kerala



### Chapter Three

After three and a half years in Kerala I was transferred back to Tamil Nadu, to work under the rather severe chief accountant of the Salem branch, Mr. S. Venkata Subrahmanian. As it is common usage for educated English-speaking Tamils to be addressed by the first initials of their names, he was known to one and all as SVS.

My two good “same-age” friends were co-workers Vaidyanathan, serious, bespectacled and a bit shy, and Shankara Subrahmania, a jolly, big-bodied chap. The first six months I lived alone in a small rented room; after that I shared a place with Shankara until the spring of 1974.

I returned to Tamil Nadu with more than just office experience. While in Kerala, my youthful interest in the opposite sex had continued to flourish, but with a difference. From left- and right-hand tantra, I’d learned a highly sophisticated way of interacting with the female psyche. The several close relationships I’d had with girls while in Kerala were experiments in the power of Shakti, by which the sexual drive is channeled not towards physical gratification but to heightened experiences of mind. I’d learned well from my vamamarga master that the physical act of sex spoils the opportunity to really exploit women for what they have to offer men. So on the surface at least, I’d remained a good brahmin boy. But the real fact was that my lust had assumed such cosmic proportions that I saw no point in trying to satisfy it by mere physical means.

I returned, too, with considerably reinforced faith in Hinduism. Thrice I'd taken part in the yearly pilgrimage to Ghandagiri, seeing the mysterious flame of Ayyappa each time. The one year I'd delved deeply into occult tantra had satisfied me that there is more to existence than mechanical pushes and pulls. Now I felt enough confidence to openly dedicate myself to the mainstream Hindu ritualism I had formerly ridiculed.

In Salem I became an ardent devotee of Karttikeya, a deity quite popular among Tamils. He appeals to the mystical as well as material impulses of the common man, and that suited me just fine. Moreover, I'd never forgotten the childhood vision I'd had at his shrine.

Occult 'self-worship' (ahamgrahopasana) is very prominent among Karttikeya's devotees. During Thaipusam, a festival held each year in early spring, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims who flock to his temples in Tamil Nadu, Ceylon, Malaysia, Singapore, Mauritius – wherever South Indians have put down roots – are taken possession by the god and the horde of ghosts who serve him. In the trance of Karttikeya, some even thrust spears through their tongues or cheeks. Yet they feel no pain, nor do they even bleed; they prophesize and perform minor miracles, 'becoming' the god for a while.

In an interesting parallel to Christianity, South Indian Hindus believe Karttikeya to be the son of God (Shiva), born of miraculous conception. He is called Kumara, the child divine, and Mahasena, commander of the devas and militant foe of demons. His weapon is the Shakti Vel, 'the Spear of Power.'

Though he easily awards his worshipers the bounties of material enjoyment (bhoga), his intention is to instill tyaga (renunciation) in them later on, as he showed in his own life. Once he so lustfully pursued the lovely damsels of the heavenly world that the devas complained to his mother, Parvati. To teach him a lesson, she revealed that every female in the universe is a form of herself. Deeply ashamed that he had really been lustful after his own mother, he vowed to maintain brahmacharya (celibacy) from that moment on.

But I just wanted to be known as a basically normal but dedicated Hindu believer. I wasn't aware of his hidden agenda to push me to the brink of frustration so that I'd give up my materialistic life altogether.

As Coimbatore was only a few hours due southwest of Salem by train, I'd often visit home on the weekends. Overlooking Coimbatore is a large Karttikeya temple on the side of the Nilgiri hill range. One Sunday at Mum's request I went there accompanied by my brother's fiancee and her father and two sisters. The idea was to make a good impression on them of our family.

We'd walked halfway up the long stone stairway that brought pilgrims from the foot of the hill to the temple entrance, and had stopped for a rest at a shrine of Ganesh. All at once I splashed a startling remark into the gentle stream of pleasant conversation by turning to the girl and saying, "You know, before I was born, my mother had a daughter who died in infancy. You are her, born again. Welcome back to the family."

She blinked, reddened, and looked at her father for help. He winced and shook his head. "Now why do you tell such things?"

"Because I am the one you have come to see." As I answered him, it was clear that I wasn't answering him.

The four exchanged uncomfortable looks. Emboldened, I who was not I any longer wasted no words. "I am he with six faces – Shambhava, Karttikeya himself!"

"Kannan," a sister blurted, "is your head full of rubbish? You'd be in enough trouble if you blamed the god for your one face only, because simply rubbish comes out of it."

I closed my eyes and clapped my hands thrice, then sat still while they murmured amongst themselves. Within a few moments a peacock appeared on the scene, announcing himself with a loud call. The peacock is Karttikeya's familiar.

Smiling slightly, I opened my eyes. With a discourteous grunt, the father got to his feet. "Let's go up now," he muttered to his daughters. I rose and joined them. "Right now there is a lady in the temple who is very devoted to me," I chatted amiably as we stepped out of the shrine's shadow onto the sunny stairway. "She is wearing a green sari and will soon come down the stairs." A group of women came out of the temple to begin their descent just as we reached the top. One wore a bright green sari. "Coincidence!" hissed the girls, their eyes flashing daggers of reproach my way. Their father walked ahead stiffly, acknowledging nothing.

Inside the temple, the priests were bathing the murti with various liquids. As they poured milk over Karttikeya's form, I felt the same substance coursing over my body. I rolled a shirtsleeve up to my elbow and told the father to look at my forearm. He frowned, then gasped as his eyes fell upon the white droplets condensing on my skin. His three daughters shrieked and clutched each other. The crowd pressed in around us, babbling excitedly. I was finally ushered outside by the priests, who didn't want their ceremony disturbed.

Though it didn't wreck my brother's engagement, this incident was the first noticeable crack in my connection to the everyday world.

Later I got the mantra-siddhi of Karttikeya, a perfection by which I could teleport his sacred ash (obtained as a blessing from the temple priests) from a covered bowl in a locked closet to my hand. I got this power by daily chanting a mantra a certain number of times for forty-one days. But because I didn't continue the sadhana after that, it gradually faded away.

Another cryptic vista opened a few months later. One evening in my Salem boarding house, I'd just turned off the light and laid down for rest when I heard a knock at the door. I got up, flicked on the light, threw open the sliding bolt and pulled the door wide. There was nobody in the hall. I leaned out over the stairwell and scanned the ground floor below. Empty. I closed the door, put out the light and went back to bed.

Within seconds, again a knock.

I checked once more. Nothing.

When it happened a third time, I went to the window and looked out on the lane. I discerned a lone figure standing in the night shadows. He was stark naked, his body covered with ash, and had a long beard and matted locks. Raising a hand as if in blessing, he framed the words "Come to Chendamangalam" with his mouth. I heard them in my head. Then he turned and disappeared in the darkness.

It was the sadhu out of the dream of the lake that I'd had years before.

I was stunned. If I had but dreamed this now, I would have gone back to sleep and forgotten about it. Yet – I turned on the light, splashed water on my face and looked in the mirror – I'd been awake the whole time! I sat up half the night, my mind in a spin. Who could this sadhu be? And where on earth – if it was on earth – was Chendamangalam?

The next day, one of our sales agents dropped into the office to turn in an order he'd taken for some tractor tires. He came to my desk with the down payment and I entered it in the cashbook, noting the details from his sales record slip. When I saw the customer's address, I gaped: Chendamangalam.

Barely able to hide my excitement, I asked him about the place. He told me it was a rural town not more than two hours' bus ride out of Salem. I silently vowed to visit it as soon as possible.

When I returned to my place after work I found a letter from Mum in the postbox, which I read as I walked upstairs and entered my room. Her sister's husband, a Canara Bank official, had gotten transferred to a branch near Salem. They'd moved to this area and were living in a rented

house. Mum asked me to ‘kindly soon visit them at the address given below.’ I sat down heavily upon the bed as I saw, for the second time that day, the name of the town spoken by the mysterious sadhu.

That weekend I took the bus journey to Chendamangalam, arriving at Aunty’s house before lunch. After exchanging some fond words with the family, I strolled into their back garden alone, just having a look around. The yard was enclosed by a high whitewashed brick wall with a green wooden gate set in the middle of its length. I unlatched the gate and swung it open. On the horizon I saw a hill topped by a temple, the same hill and temple from the dream of the lake.

Without a word to anyone, I walked through the gate and continued for almost an hour until I came to the foot of that hill. After ascending the temple staircase I reached the sanctum sanctorum, which was capped by a large pointed dome. Looking in, I saw a murti with three faces and six arms standing in a graceful pose on a massive black stone plinth. I recognized the symbols of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva in his hands: the waterpot and scripture, the conch and lotus, the trident and strand of rudraksha beads.

The pujari came to give me flower petals that had been offered to the feet of the murti. I asked him which deity this was. He smiled, pleased at my interest. “This is Dattatreya.”

Dattatreya appeared in ancient times as the son of the sage Atri and his wife Anasuya. He was a transcendental child benedicted upon the sage by the trimurti Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, the three forms of the Supreme who create, maintain and destroy the universe.

The pujari showed me a cave beneath the foundation of the temple. Some five feet in diameter and twenty feet long, it was the samadhi (tomb) of a yogi whose marble ash-bedecked statue sat in the lotus position at the cave’s far end, over his interred remains. It was the same sadhu I’d seen in the lane some nights ago and in the dream long before.

There were also a few framed pictures on display: some were of the yogi, some of other holy men, and one was a puzzle of a cat in a tree that the yogi had painted to entertain children visiting the temple. Again, a figment come true.

From the priest I learned that the yogi was Sri Svayamprakash Brahmendra Avadhuta Swami, who had died in 1948. I asked if it was possible that he could yet be seen in the world today. He nodded a vigorous assent: “Yes, since Swamiji passed from his physical form, he has shown himself to many people. He was a siddha-yogi, so that much power he has.”

He told me that Brahmendra Avadhuta had realized Brahman, the absolute primordial consciousness devoid of name, form, quality or desire. This impersonal concept of God is well-established in India, having been widely promulgated down to the present day by the school of Adi Shankara, a Vedantist who lived some 1400 years ago. Its proponents call it Advaitavada, 'the doctrine of oneness.'

As a householder, Brahmendra Avadhuta had lived and worked in Coimbatore, but left it all for the Himalayas. He took the vow of sannyasa (formal renunciation of worldly life) from a guru in the avadhuta line. Among the austerities the avadhutas observe is the dighambara-vrata (oath of wearing only the sky). For many years he meditated alone in the mountains until he got the inspiration to come to Latagiri hill near Chendamangalam and establish his temple to Dattatreya. He took on four disciples; each started his own ashram in the area. A family descended from his older brother was maintaining the temple when I found it.

Their house was at the bottom of the hill. I introduced myself and in the course of our get-together inquired if there had ever been a lake nearby.

An old lady, the yogi's niece, spoke up for the first time: "How do you know about the lake?" I hedged, shy about revealing my dream. She pulled open the drawer of an antique cabinet and took out a yellowed sketch of the temple and hill done during Brahmendra Avadhuta's lifetime. A lake was shown at the foot of one side of the hill where now there was only a grove of small trees.

Pointing at the lake with gnarled, trembling fingers, she explained, "When Swamiji left this world, that lake dried up."

I took to visiting Chendamangalam as often as I could, becoming increasingly obsessed with Dattatreya and Brahmendra Avadhuta. My mind was drawn into a psychic vortex that seemed to emanate from the samadhi. Insights and visions streamed through this 'tube' for hours at a time, sweeping me beyond the skyline of conventional reason. I became known to some locals as a clairvoyant, for in conversation I might suddenly reveal hidden secrets of their lives or accurately predict the future, without knowing how myself. Other people thought me a crackbrain.

It was at this time that I began studying Advaita philosophy to better appreciate the level of realization Brahmendra Avadhuta had attained. I got to know his disciples and learned what I could from them. In a nearby town there was a chapter of the Shivananda Yoga Mission offering Advaitist books that I consumed by the armload.

Then:

In December of 1973, I took a holiday trip with a bus tour group to Mahabalipuram, an ancient port town some eighty kilometers south of Madras. Mahabalipuram is nowadays a sleepy little seaside resort for middle-class vacationers and foreign tourists. But the many old temples and rock carvings in the area attest to its having once been a seat of high culture during the reign of the Pallava kings, a millenium and a half ago.

The last site we were to visit that afternoon was a Devi temple near the Mahabalipuram lighthouse. On the way back to the bus we briefly stopped by the Mahishamardini Mandapam, a pilgrim's shelter (mandapa) carved out of solid rock in the side of a hill. In the gray stone of the left wall we could see the worn bas-relief figure of Vishnu fighting the demons Madhu and Kaitabha; on the opposite wall was a carving of Devi with eighteen arms killing the demon Mahisha.

As I stood before the mandapa, I was overwhelmed by a sense of *deja vu*. The tour guide briskly wound things up with a few last comments, but my mind was shifting into another dimension. I didn't notice the group carry on to the bus. I was alone and the only sound was the whoosh of the salty breeze blowing in from the ocean.

Though this was the first time I'd ever been here physically, I vaguely remembered that I'd had a dream some time before in which I spoke with a girl of about seven years old in a place very much like this. I sat down in the mandapa and tried to recall it. But the image wouldn't crystallize in my head.

It was growing dark. I was certain by now my bus had gone, and with it my overnight bag. But I didn't care. Rain began falling, rapidly splotching the tawny sand outside into a sodden terra umbra. A balding old man dressed in white scrambled down the stony hillside path from the Devi temple and took shelter in the mandapa; two ladies soon followed. As the last light died, the rain subsided.

The old man, now leaving with the ladies, looked back and asked, "You're not going? Raining has stopped." "I'm waiting for a friend," I answered evasively. "Well", he replied, "if you want to get out tonight, better you wait at the bus stand. The last bus to Madras is just now coming." Then they were gone.

The sky cleared, the swirling gossamer ghosts of spent rainclouds giving way to the moon and stars and the inscrutable black infinity behind them. The night – cloaked and brooding, the antemundane mystery of existence that the day makes us forget with illusory forms and colors – glided silently out of the abyss of deep space and whispered secret life into the ancient stone pantheon of Mahabalipuram. The elephants trumpeted the arrival of the night, the apsaras danced

to entertain him, the gods and sages offered him benedictions. A true connoisseur of the timeless, he remained impassive, enigmatic. The night had seen things far stranger than a celebration of statues.

I suddenly sensed that I was not alone. Muscles tensing, nostrils flaring in alarm, I strained to see whatever it was.

Something moved from behind a large boulder outside. I heard the soft tinkling of anklebells approaching as a small dark shape entered the mandapa and came before me. It was a little girl.

I stared at her hard through the moonlit gloom and remembered the dream clearly. This was the very girl herself, about seven years old and exceptionally pretty. She wore a silken blue full-length skirt and matching blouse, and had a fragrant flower pinned in her hair. Her wrists were adorned with bangles and she wore a gold chain around her neck.

Smiling shyly, she sat down daintily under the bas-relief of Devi. “Uncle, you’re not leaving this place?” Her voice was soft and melodious.

“No, I was waiting here, hoping I would meet you.”

“You were waiting for me?” She giggled. “Would you like some buttermilk?” She sprang up and skipped out of the mandapa and behind the rock again. I followed, half-expecting her to disappear as quickly as she appeared. She ran down a path to a nearby bungalow, its windows aglow with light. As I came up behind her, she called at the door and a lady appeared. “Please give Uncle some buttermilk,” the little girl asked sweetly.

I stood outside the door with the child while the lady fetched a metal pitcher and a glass. When she returned, handing me the glass full, I asked her about the girl. “Her father is a government officer here,” she told me. “I’m hired by him to take care of her. She’s a very unusual child. She can predict the future.”

The buttermilk was delicious. I returned the glass for a second filling, and as she poured, the lady added, “Some people in this town even think she is a goddess.”

After finishing the milk, I bent and shook the child’s hand. “Thank you, little princess. I think it’s time for me to go, but I am very happy to have met you.” She twinkled. “I’ll walk with you to the bus stand.”

I shook my head. "No, why there? The bus is gone by now." She giggled and teasingly retorted, "Not a bus, it's a car that you'll board there!"

"This is how she always speaks," the mistress cooed affectionately, stroking the child's cheek. We all set off together for the bus stand, a short walk away.

Suddenly, en route, she stopped and tugged both our hands. "We have to go back to Mahishamardani Mandapam," she insisted repeatedly. The mistress apologized for her behavior. "She always does these things, and while some people like it and play along, others become annoyed. I hope she's not bothering you."

"No, not at all." I smiled and surrendered to her pulling of my thumb. We turned and walked past the bungalow and up the short path to the mandapa. While the mistress waited outside, I sat down in the room's darkness with the little girl standing before me.

To my utter surprise she began speaking about my experiments with tantra in Kerala, using terminology known only to those who are initiated into vamabaga. She then told me I was wasting my time by dabbling in mysticism and Advaita philosophy. "If you want to become useful in life," she said firmly, "then you may take up the worship of Bala, leaving aside all these other things you are doing."

Bala is Devi as a virgin girl. Worship of Bala is one of the purest kinds of puja in the Shakta line. Being a child, she does not award the kind of destructive boons sought after by the tantrics.

"But I have job," I answered almost plaintively. "Isn't that useful enough?" My mind was racing. Was Devi herself speaking through this child?

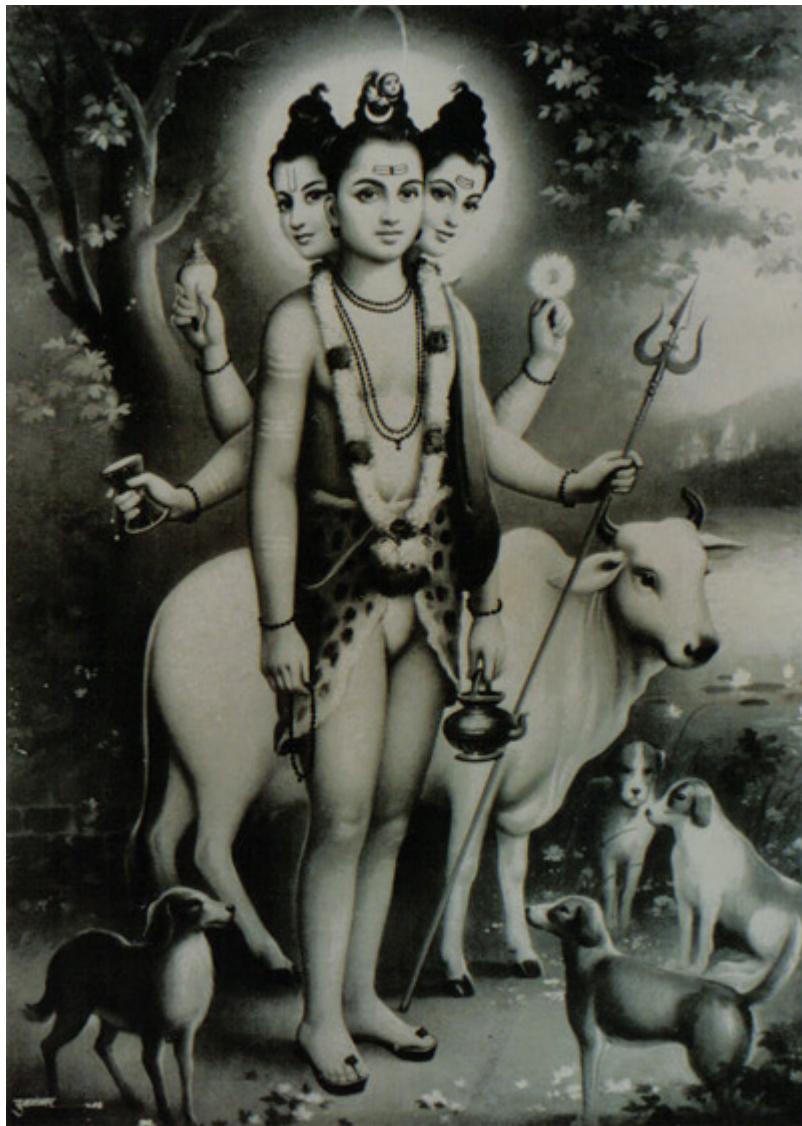
"It won't last," she said in the same firm tone. "You should become useful to everybody, to all living entities. But to come to this stage you must get free of lust, which you've failed to do by your own methods. The final goal of worship of Devi is simply to relate to the goddess and to all women in a pure way. Devi is our mother, and all females represent her. As long as you see women as objects of lust, you are as sinful as someone who lusts after his own mother. But if you respect the female principle properly as mother, you will actually become powerful. And useful."

I was speechless. How should I respond to such sagacious words coming from the mouth of a babe? But she suddenly tugged my hand and cried excitedly, "Uncle, let's go to the bus stop. Your car is ready."

We walked back the way we came and on to the bus stand. A hired Ambassador sat there with a driver behind the wheel and two foreign tourists in the back seat. The motor was running. The girl stepped up to the driver's window and exchanged some words with him. He turned to the tourists and asked them if I could ride in the car back to Madras. I offered to pay a third of the fare, and they nodded their assent. The girl then went around to the front door on the passenger's side and opened it.

"Get in, Uncle." I did as I was told. Before I could get her name, the car was rolling. Craning my neck out the window, I had my last sight of her and her mistress, silhouetted hand-in-hand on the dimly lit street, waving me off in that ageless night.

The Self in the Mirror



## Chapter Four

The Chandogya Upanishad relates how Indra, king of the devas, and Virochana, king of the demons, both became students of the science of self-realization under Brahma. Brahma, to test them first, told them that the self was what they saw when they looked into a mirror or a pan of water. Virochana believed and went back to become a guru, teaching this to the other demons, who also believed; but Indra had second thoughts and returned to receive the true knowledge of the self as soul.

The coming of the year 1974 saw my mind roiling with confusion. I had become a bibliophage, a gourmand of esoteric books on everything from astrology to Zoroaster. And I'd been offered tantalizing glimpses into heightened states of awareness by beings mysterious and divine. But it all had left me fundamentally bewildered. So many paths to so many goals – which one should I dedicate myself to? Which one led to Truth?

Though I couldn't see it at the time, the problem was the very nature of my desire to know. It is said that there are two kinds of curiosity: that for what is useful, and that for what others don't know. Mine was the latter. I wanted not so much to know as to be known by others for knowing what they did not.

And the visitations of divinities? Even if it was true a great siddha-yogi or Karttikeya or Devi had come to me, they, like Brahma, held mirrors in their hands.

After returning to Salem, I took up the worship of Bala as the little girl in Mahabalipuram had advised. It did chasten my outlook on women. But I found it impossible to fix my mind exclusively in the Shakta discipline.

I had no doubt that worship of Devi, who carries twenty weapons representing twenty kinds of pious deeds recommended in the Vedas for subduing vices, purifies the base animalistic desire. I'd discovered this years before in Kerala. But I questioned the final goal of it all. The Devidham (place of Devi) is the material universe. It contains fourteen levels of worlds in which the souls transmigrating from species to species are confined. The goddess is named Durga (dur – difficult, ga – movement) because she imprisons these souls in matter.

The philosophy of the Shaktas is called Sambhavadarshana. The goal is to become identical to that Divine Mother who is the origin (srishti) of material existence. Everything has its support (sthiti) in her. At the time of cosmic dissolution (pralaya) everything merges into her. In Sambhavadarshana there is nothing beyond this continual cycle of creation and destruction, so there is no provision for liberation from matter. The meditation of the Shaktas is to constantly think of themselves as women, because in their view God is the original female (adyashakti).

Durga has two sons, Ganesha and Karttikeya. Both are deputed leaders of Shiva's ganas (followers); Karttikeya is specifically Shreshtharaja, the sublord of the bhutas (ghosts). Ganesha represents material success and Karttikeya material beauty. Worship of Ganesha or Karttikeya can gradually qualify one to enter Kailash, the most elevated plane of material existence, the abode of Shiva. But even here one does not surpass the cycle of birth and death. One of the great saints of Shaivism, Sundaramurthi Nayanar, is said to have taken his birth in South India after falling from Kailash due to becoming lusty for one of Shiva's female servants.

Shiva, the master of siddha-yoga, is ever fixed in meditation upon Transcendence. Those who are austere and determined enough to follow his example may by his grace cross from Kailash into Sadashivaloka, his eternal realm forever illumined by the rays of the effulgent spiritual sky, just beyond the threshold of Devidham.

This was the path taken by Brahmendra Avadhuta, and it was surely closed to people like me. I was not prepared to meditate naked in the cold Himalayas for years together.

But many of the Advaitist books I'd read averred that realizing Brahman was not so difficult; it was all a matter of mind-set. One should conceive of the manifest world as maya, an illusion having no more substance than a dream. Hidden behind maya is the impersonal Absolute, the only reality. The central theme of Advaita philosophy is expressed by the declaration *tat tvam asi*, 'you are that (Brahman).' If I am Brahman, then the world is merely my own hallucination. By proper discrimination (viveka), I should be able to negate the world and achieve the supreme bliss of the self (ananda).

The Advaitist doctrine relies on clever syllogism to defend its theory that everything we see is really only formless Brahman. This has popularized it among those fond of speculation.

For instance, Advaitists say that the material world is a reflection of Brahman, like a reflection of the moon on water. To the objection that this analogy betrays Brahman's formlessness because to be reflected Brahman must have form, the reply is that form should not be mistaken for substance. When we see a reflection of something, it is of the form, not of the substance itself. Thus form is distinct from substance. And because form can be reflected it is inherently illusory. Moreover, Brahman is not a substance – it is ineffable. So the rule of symmetry of comparison does not apply.

Shankara conceived of three levels of awareness: *pratibhasika*, complete illusion; *vyavaharika*, conventional or useful illusion; and *paramarthika*, transcendence. In complete illusion, one thinks the reflection is real. In conventional illusion, though still seeing it, one knows it is a reflection and acts to overcome it. That ultimately means one must become a sannyasi ordained in

Shankara's line and follow the strict code of monastic life prescribed by him. In the paramarthika stage, one's sense of individual identity, the substance that gives form to illusion, is eradicated entirely. Only then is illusion vanquished. There are no words to describe the experience of transcendence, because words are also forms of the substance of false identity.

Because the means of awakening to transcendence is itself illusory, a cogent explanation of just how illusion is overcome is not possible in Advaitism. A great Advaitist scholar, Jayatirtha Muni, compared it to having a nightmare. When one is sufficiently frightened, one awakes, and the nightmare (the vyavaharika illusion) disappears.

On the vyavaharika platform the Advaitist worships the form of God (as Devi, Ganesh, Surya, Shiva or Vishnu), but with the intention of seeing the worship, worshiper and worshiped dissolve into impersonal oneness. It is sometimes said that this dissolution happens 'by the grace of maya.'

Thus Advaitists are also known as Mayavadis. Because their perfection ultimately depends on the grace of maya, there are now many Mayavadis around the world who feel no compulsion to adhere to Shankara's methods. If life be but illusion, then distinguishing between a monastic life and a licentious life is also vain illusion. His commentary on Vedanta-sutra, a weighty Sanskrit lucubration of dry abstractions, was traditionally required daily reading for his followers. But nowadays Mayavadi Vedantism has been reduced to trite sloganeering like 'It's all in the mind,' 'It's all one,' and the final twist: 'I am God.'

While appreciating the slipperiness of some of the arguments, I found the Advaitist denouement disappointing. If my self is already identical with Brahman, then why is the realization of this supposedly universal truth limited to just a few rare souls? If I am one with those souls who have realized Brahman, why didn't I and everyone else realize it when they did? It added up to a free lunch I couldn't afford.

When I once expressed my dissatisfaction with Advaita philosophy to a disciple of Brahmendra Avadhuta, he sent me to a sadhu who was an adherent of the Sankhya doctrine.

There is a theistic and an atheistic form of Sankhya. The theistic Sankhya tradition begins with the Puranas and was first taught by the sage Kapila, an incarnation of Vishnu. The atheistic version is recounted in an ancient treatise called Sankhya-karika by Ishvarakrishna. He gives credit to someone also named Kapila as the inventor, though no writings from that Kapila are extant. The sadhu I met was from the atheistic school.

The word sankhya means ‘count’; Sankhya philosophy counts up the elements of reality and categorizes them within two ultimate principles: purusha (spirit) and prakriti (matter). Because it identifies these two as the opposite but complimentary factors of existence, Sankhya is free of the unintelligible solipsism that plagues the Advaita doctrine.

Prakriti gives form to the world, and purusha gives it consciousness, and both are real. In the purusha category are innumerable individual souls, called jivas, who are eternally distinct from one another. Under the influence of prakriti, they become bound by the three qualities (gunas) of goodness (sattva), passion (rajas) and ignorance (tamas). Thus they develop physical forms consisting of gross and subtle material elements and are forced to suffer the pains of birth, old age, disease and death repeatedly. But in their essence, the jivas are always pure.

The means to liberation in Sankhya is detachment. When the soul ceases to identify with the external coverings of the false ego, intellect, mind, senses and the sense objects, he is released from suffering. The means to detachment is self-analysis through yoga.

My Sankhya teacher was invited to an Advaitist ashram to engage in debate with some of their scholars. I accompanied him, and was amazed as he defeated fifteen Mayavadi sannyasis in a row. Seeing this convinced me that the Advaitist philosophy has serious shortcomings.

Further investigation of Sankhya led me to books expounding the theistic version. And here again I found two divisions: Vishishtadvaita and Dvaita, the first propounded by Ramanuja and the latter by Madhva. Both are systems of Vaishnava Vedanta in which Samkhya plays a supporting role.

In Vishishtadvaita (‘qualified monism’), the jivas and prakriti are held to be qualities (visheshanam) of Vishnu, the highest truth. Ramanuja compares them to the body, and Vishnu to the soul, of Brahman. Vishnu is therefore the only Purusha.

The jivas are classified as superior spiritual energy (parashakti), like Vishnu in quality. But they are small in potency, like infinitesimal particles of sunlight. Vishnu, their source, is the Greatest Being (Vibhu), just as the sun is the greatest light in the sky.

Matter is like a cloud. Though also generated by the sun, a cloud is inferior in energy to the sunlight; thus matter is called inferior energy (aparashakti). Matter is the cause of maya, and just a cloud blocks a portion of the sunlight, maya deludes some of the souls. But compared to the sun, maya is insignificant.

Both the souls and maya are fully dependent upon and in that way inseparable from Vishnu. He is the transcendental Lord, eternal, full of knowledge and bliss, and ever a person. In the philosophy of qualified monism, *tat tvam asi* ('you are the same') means 'you, the individual soul, are the same in quality as Vishnu.' But it can never mean 'you are God.'

Madhva was implacably opposed to monism, so he boldly called his system Dvaita, or Dualism. His main target was Shankara's Advaita, but he also took exception to certain tenets of Ramanuja's Vishishtadvaita.

The word *advaita* is taken by Shankara and to a certain extent by Ramanuja to mean 'not different.' Madhva was strictly literal: *advaita* means 'not two' as in the sense of the Upanishadic statement *eka brahma dvitiya nasti*, 'Brahman is one, there is no second.' Dvaita philosophy thus established that God is unrivalled and aloof. He has no competitor, nor is He beholden to anyone. Therefore He cannot be bewildered by maya as the Mayavadis believe. Nor can the souls and maya be said to comprise His body, because that would imply His dependence upon them.

In other words, *advaita* really means 'unique.' God, being unique, must be distinguished from that which is under Him. But this does imply utter severance of the souls and matter from God. For example, the statement 'the lotus is blue' is not rendered untrue by acknowledging that the flower and the color are not one and the same. Thus Madhva's Dvaita is not like the fundamental dualism of atheistic Sankhya. It upholds one God and one God only who is the source of everything. Dvaita indicates 'distinction' in the dual sense of discrimination and eminence, i.e. Dvaita distinguishes God because God is distinguished.

For the two questions I considered most important – 'What is God?' and 'How do I attain God?' – Ramanuja and Madhva gave identical answers: Sri Vishnu is God and is attained by *bhakti* (pure devotion of the soul). Both further agreed that liberation is never wrested by the strength of the *jiva*'s knowledge or detachment, and it is certainly not awarded by matter. Liberation is granted by Divine Grace, and is not confined to those who make effort to receive it. And liberation is not merely the cessation of suffering. It is a state of positive spiritual bliss obtained through association with Vishnu, the All-Blissful.

I thought the Vaishnava teachings were easily the purest of the philosophies I'd covered. But I had my reservations. Foremost was the fact that I found the other doctrines more accessible. Without much endeavor I was able to master Shakta, Shaiva, Advaita and atheistic Sankhya to the point where I could easily pass as an authority. But whenever I read the Vaishnava texts, I felt like an outsider looking in. It just didn't fit my mentality.

Another doubt arose from the visits I'd made in my life to Vaishnava temples. I couldn't see anything in the priests or the faithful that really distinguished them from the general mass of pious, ritualistic Hindus. I'd read the biographies of Ramanuja and Madhva, and I believed they were ideal saints and teachers. If I'd met Vaishnavas like them, it would be much easier to accept their fine philosophical conclusions. But from what I'd seen, the Vaishnavas were just another orthodox Hindu community going about their everyday lives.

The sampradayas or schools of Ramanuja and Madhva upheld the Hindu tradition of Brahmanism by birth. To be sure, the Vaishnavas admitted that a man, woman or child of any caste or even no caste could be blessed by Divine Grace. But it was only the Brahmins who by birthright were the special servants of Vishnu in this world. They alone were pure by nature and thus entitled to perform the temple rituals. This smacked of elitism, and I didn't like it.

It appeared that Vishnu Himself didn't always like it either. Ranganatha, the Vishnu murti at the temple of Rangakshetra in Trichy, is said to have locked the head priest out of the sanctum sanctorum because he had abused Tiruppan Alvar, a Vaishnava saint from the pariah caste. The murti refused to open the door until the priest carried Tiruppan into the temple upon his shoulders.

Andal, another famous Vaishnava saint, was a young girl who stepped boldly into the sanctum sanctorum to accept Ranganatha as her husband. As a class, women are considered ritually impure and are not permitted to enter the altar of the murti. But Vishnu does not care for ritualistic purity as much as pure devotion. Andal was miraculously absorbed into Ranganatha and is honored today as an expansion of Lakshmi, the feminine personification of Vishnu's spiritual potency.

I decided to just suspend belief in all these doctrines and go on with my search for a direct experience of transcendence by which I'd know intuitively which philosophy, if any, was true. But to impress others, I used to assume these standpoints rhetorically. If I happened to meet a Shakta, I might speak like an Advaitist. Or with an Advaitist, I might argue Sankhya. Like the Muslim who became an infidel while hesitating between two mosques, I was a general disappointment to everyone.

My book-buying stops at the Shivananda Yoga Mission had gotten me on friendly terms with the director, a calm, sober and well-spoken fellow a few years my senior. He disapproved of my eclecticism and argued that to make progress on any path, I had to first take up the prescribed sadhana.

“By reading books you simply grasp the tail of the eel of enlightenment. It will ever slip away from you,” he told me in gentle, measured tones. “Better you stick to one thing and perfect it. I can teach you a daily program of yoga that will help you to concentrate your mind on the inner light. You will become peaceful, and where there is peace, there is God.”

I tried, but my mind was too damned restless to maintain it.

When I met him again and confessed my inability to keep up the program, he closed his eyes for a moment in thoughtful silence. Then he opened them, but kept his gaze lowered as he spoke.

“The single-minded animal is captured by its deadly enemy because its actions are predictable. But a man of many minds is captured because of his unsteadiness.” He paused, then fixed his eyes on mine as he spoke again. “Do you know what man’s deadly enemy is?”

“No,” I answered in a small voice.

He quoted the Bhagavad-gita: “It is lust only, Arjuna, which is born of contact with the material modes of passion and later transformed into wrath, which is the all-devouring, sinful enemy of this world.”



## Chapter Five

“If you want to become a high priest of humbug, fine – but you are surely not going to do it on company time!”

The chief accountant, SVS, a spartan, no-nonsense company functionary with a schoolmaster’s mien and sense of metaphor, was addressing me with volume control turned up for the benefit of everyone else in the office. He’d had it up to the eyes; it was time to put his foot down.

I continued sketching my picture of Dattatreya as if I hadn’t heard him. He swept the room with a penetrating You’re Next glare that put noses to the grindstone at desks where a moment before sniggering rubbernecks had sat. Then, after a last withering look at me, he scowled in disgust and grumbled: “You’ll end up painting that picture on the sidewalk for tossed coins, you – you poppycock dreamer!” He stalked off.

It hadn’t been the first time that I’d drawn Dattatreya on valuable company letterhead at my desk. On other occasions I had wasted valuable company time by rambling on endlessly about the difference between the Pashupata and Shaiva Siddhanta sects, or the distinctive features of the Seven Shaktis, or the story of the green huntress Valli and Karttikeya. All this SVS had overlooked because I’d been his star assistant for over two years and had always compensated for my eccentricities with hard work.

But the day before yesterday I’d left work early, without telling anyone. Yesterday I hadn’t come to work at all, and gave no reason. Today I was at my desk, but only drawing pictures of Dattatreya and speaking to no one.

A few minutes later Vaidyanathan put his hand on my shoulder. “Chum, the M.D. (Managing Director) is asking for you. SVS has seen him and raised hell.” Wordlessly, I dropped my pencil, stood up, and ambled into the the M.D.’s office.

He greeted me with a polite smile and invited me to sit down and explain my behavior over the last three days. After a few moment of dead silence while I extracted words from the ether and arranged them in my head, I began.

“The day before yesterday I was called from work to the Dattatreya temple in Chendamangalam...” He put up his hand to interrupt.

“Who called you?”

“Sri Svayamprakash Brahmendra Saraswati, the mahanta of the temple.”

“Accha. So guruji telephoned you here at the office.”

“No. He calls me through the mind.”

“Yes, quite. Kindly continue.”

“I stayed all night at the temple, because a special abhisheka (bathing ceremony) was held at midnight.” Again he interrupted.

“So guruji was having a special festival and invited you through the mind to come.”

“Yes, but he was not there visibly, because he left the world in 1948.”

“Yes, yes. Please go on.”



Lord Dattatreya

“Then, in the early morning hours I left the temple. I came down the hill onto the road. There I met two ghosts. I chanted a Karttikeya mantra and delivered them to the control of Shreshtaraja. The rest of the day I had to take rest. Today I am only thinking of Dattatreya.”

“Only?”

“Yes.”

He gave me that side-to-side nod of the head peculiar to Indians and leaned forward as if to take me in confidence.

After hearing my own voice relate these events, I understood for the first time that I might be losing my mind. I braced myself for what the M.D. was about to say.

He held up a palm and slightly patted the air above his desk while he spoke, as if my poor head was under it.

“Kannan, listen. Things have changed in India. The time of all the gods and temples is gone. Oh, simple folk may carry on with these quaint forms of Hindu piety, but you are an educated young man. You’ve got to keep your eyes on tomorrow, not yesterday.”

I tried speaking up for myself, humbly, knowing full well he was just indulging me with his gentle speech and understanding manner. Of course he thought me mad. I was beginning to think so myself.

“But sir,” I choked, next to tears, “I sincerely believe in the Hindu religion. After investigating tantra, Shakta, Advaita and the other paths, I have come to realize its true value and ...”

He patted the air, nodding his head patiently from side to side until my voice trailed off.

“That’s all right, Kannan. I’m not saying you should give up religion. You’ve just got to be realistic about it, that’s all.”

He opened a drawer and very reverently took out two photographs, laying them on his desk for me to see. One was of a sadhu dressed in white, with long hair and beard. The other was of a smiling woman, perhaps a Western lady, I thought.

“This” – he pointed to the sadhu’s picture – “is the avatara of the age. In him all the gods reside. His name is Sri Aurobindo. And this is his shakti, whom we revere as the Mother. Though both have passed on into the realm beyond, they are still very much with us in spirit. Their teachings blend all that you’ve come to value in Hinduism into one scientific synthesis.”

This wasn't quite what I had expected from the M.D. His eyes were positively alight with glory. All my worries of losing my mind and my job faded, for I was sure if SVS saw the M.D. now, he'd think him a far worse high priest of humbug than I. We were kindred spirits, me and old Directorji, poppycock dreamers duluxe, but somehow he'd made it into the upper echelon of TVS management. So there must be something to say about this Aurobindo thing he was raving on about.

"I will now give you a mantra, Kannan," he solemnly declared. "I want you to keep these pictures on your desk and offer everything you do to Sri Aurobindo and the Holy Mother. This will bring you back to reality, and you'll attain the goal of all religions."

I became a zealous convert. Before touching the pencil in the morning, I would do puja to it, offering incense, a flower and prayers. After writing out a bill, I'd hold it up to the photos, chant the mantra and drop it, sanctified, into the 'out' tray. I offered the entries I made in the ledger. And the coffee during the coffee break.

This shifted my mind into the psychic 'tube', and right there at work the visions started flowing in. I'd buttonhole someone almost every day, in the office or in the factory, and fill his ears with my latest revelations. If he listened long enough, I'd get a resonance going with his mind, like getting a gong to vibrate by striking another gong of the same pitch. I could then tap into his subconscious and receive hidden memories, or feed my own thoughts into his head. I amazed and mystified quite a few fellow employees that way. So it wasn't that everybody thought me a strange duck quacking nonsense.

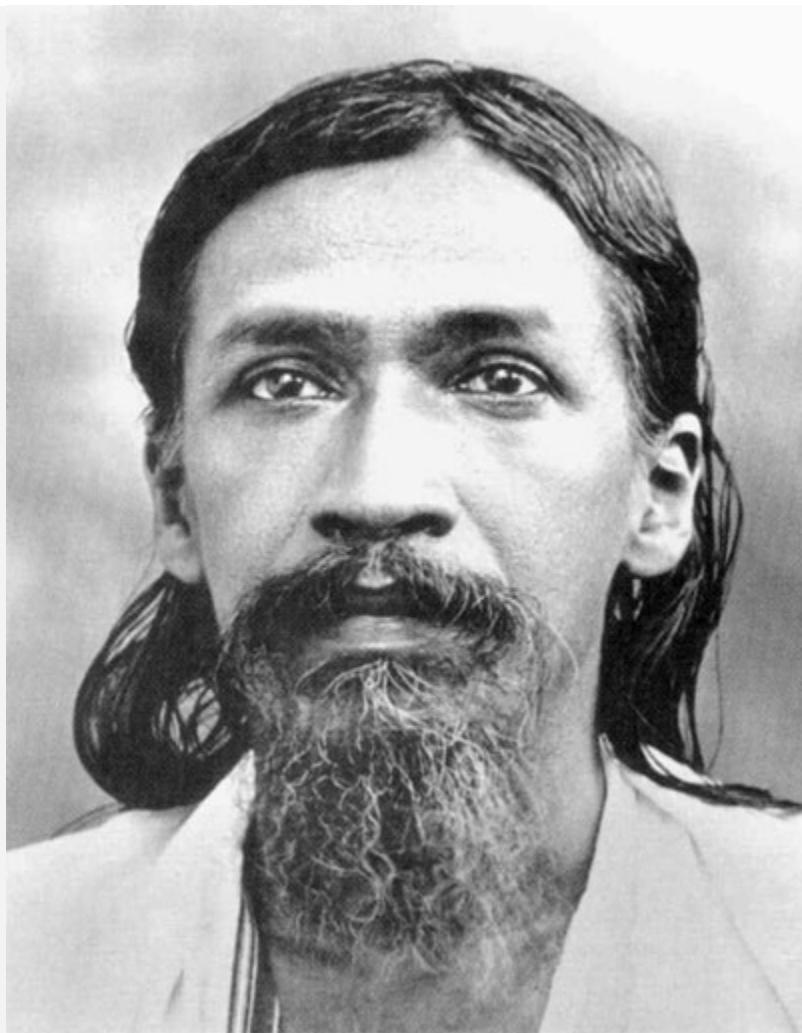
But as far as SVS was concerned, I'd become a balmy round-the-bender, dotty as a loon. It wasn't long before I was in the M.D.'s office again.

This time he arranged time off for me so that I could journey with Mum to Pondicherry, where Auroville, the ashram founded by Aurobindo in 1926, was located. We stayed there fifteen days. I got to know M.P. Pandit, a confidante of the recently deceased Mother, quite well. He was impressed with what he thought were my psychic powers. Somehow, from down the 'tube', the memory-images of a secretary (no longer in Auroville) who'd typed the Mother's letters some twenty years before were streaming into my mind. Pandit checked the information I gave him against the letters in the archives and found it accurate.

He asked me to stay, but when I saw meat being served in the dining room, and foreign girls in T-shirts and shorts mixing freely with the men, I declined. Mum, a simple lady who'd never been confronted with loose Western ways before, was scandalized. She couldn't accept that there was

any value in Aurobindo's teachings after seeing life in Auroville. "The chicken thief comes sporting a feather," was her way of saying, "Know a tree by the fruits."

As for me, I simply incorporated what I thought was useful from Aurobindo's ideas into what I was already doing. Certainly, the daily puja to Aurobindo and the Mother was useful. It saved me my job for the simple reason that the M.D. continued to have faith in me. After returning from Auroville, he let me do pretty much what I wanted. Once in a while, I might actually put in a full day's work. Other days, I would work for an hour or two, then drift into idle reverie and leave whenever I felt like it. But I continued collecting full pay, much to SVS's chagrin.



**Sri Aurobindo**

I'd been sharing an apartment for more than a year with Shankara Subrahmania. He was a jolly fellow who weathered my vagaries well, even when I would sometimes flick on the light at midnight, wake him up and harangue him on some arcane topic for an hour or two.

There was another fellow our age, named Mani, an oddjobber, who lived in the same building. He too thought himself a bit of a philosopher, but one of the world, the flesh and the Devil. As long as I only talked of religion and esoterica, he kept away. But when I started to have trouble at work, I began expressing doubts about the course my life was taking.

As fascinated as I was with spirituality, I'd come a to a crossroads with it and didn't know which way to turn. If I was to again concentrate on a career with TVS, I'd have to give it up completely. But that had become extremely difficult. My mind constantly percolated with clairvoyant visions and I just couldn't hide it anymore. Coping with the workaday world was becoming a major problem.

When Mani came to know of this, he stepped into my life with his smirking advice. "Listen, Aiyer, you're in trouble because you aim too high, know what I mean? Trying to be a pukka brahmin, but for what? You're too clean for your own good. If you want to clear all this hocus-pocus out of your head, you got to dirty up a bit." He hinted that he "knew just what I needed, and could help me get it." I feigned disinterest, but Mani persisted day after day, sensing my resolve was crumbling. And it surely was.

Young men everywhere have a fancy for the female form. But in respectable Indian society there is only one acceptable outlet for it, and that is marriage. I'd remained unmarried and avoided scandal, not because of a lack of attraction to women, but because I'd sublimated a great deal of my sexuality with the help of right-hand tantra. I had practiced it for the past five years, and since meeting the little prophetess of Mahabalipuram, I'd become quite strict.

I liked to think of my interests in women as aesthetic appreciations of the divine female principle. I especially enjoyed seeing the movements of skilled female dancers in Bharat-natyam performances. And, having moved among actors, I knew how to capture a beautiful woman's attention and hold it in conversation. I'd get vicarious pleasure from watching her graceful gestures and hearing her melodious voice. Now and again I'd encourage a woman I liked to become emotionally attached to me so that I could enjoy her affections. But I always tried to keep a proper reserve: they were representations of Devi, and I couldn't sully my family's good name with shameful behavior.

By the ritualism of Shakta-tantra, I had 'mist-tified' the raging river of youthful male lust into a quiet haze, a curtain of nebulous, dissipated libido that shone silvery white on the outside but drizzled dark and obsessive within. Deep in the foggy interior, fettered by archaic Hindu mores that steadily rusted away in the dampness, the black fiend Kali, human degradation personified, thrilled at every touch, however slight, of the filaments of my consciousness upon the female form – be it Devi or the flesh-meat of pimps, it was all the same in Kali's night of the soul. And he wanted much, much more than I'd been giving him.

Now Kali had found a voice: Mani's.

One evening as I sat wasting Shankara's time, giving him a lecture on palmistry, Mani came to the door, a skinny wolf dressed in what I called a 'hero suit', a cheap knock-off of the kind of outfits worn by Bombay cinema heroes. With sly nonchalance he said, "Hey Brahmin, let Shankara get some sleep and come out with me tonight."

Shankara was only too glad to let me go. We ended up in what I thought was a hotel. But when Mani began negotiations with the manager, I knew immediately it was not a place where you got a good night's sleep. I took Mani aside.

"Leave me out of whatever you're arranging, okay?"

He chuckled and hit me lightly on the shoulder. "Right, Brahmin, no problem. You just sit yourself down here in the lobby. I've got a little business to take care of upstairs. I'll be with you in about (here he winked) half an hour."

Two minutes later a servant boy came down to tell me that Mani needed my help. I followed the boy up three flights of stairs and to a room where I found Mani with two heavily made-up girls in tawdry glamour gowns, perfect compliments for the would-be hero.

He stood between them, an arm around each one. Flashing a big grin as I entered, he sang out, "Here's the pandit! Brahmin baby, I've got two beautiful sweeties here and I don't know which one to choose. Tell me who's the best." The floozies giggled. In jest, I pointed to the one on the left. He steered her over to me.

"You got a real sharp eye for the ladies, panditji. So take her."

Half-heartedly, I turned to leave. He blocked my way and sneered in my face, "Hey, look, Brahmin baby, I gone through a lot of trouble tonight just to help you out. You wanna get your feet back on the ground? Get those jinnis out of your head? I got the solution for you – a sure cure for the too damn pure."

I gave in, thinking it my fate, like that of the mouse returned to its kind.

In the Panchatantra, there is a story of a female mouse that was seized by a hawk, carried aloft, and dropped over the river Ganges. Below, the great sage Yajnavalkya was performing his ablutions. The mouse fell right into his cupped palms containing holy Ganges water. By contact

with the combined spiritual power of the saint and the sacred water, the mouse was transformed into a baby girl.

Yajnavalkya took the child home and gave her to his wife to raise as their daughter. When the child turned twelve years of age, he thought to arrange the most excellent match for her marriage.

He first summoned the sun-god Surya, who appeared at his ashram. But the girl thought him too blazing hot. Yajnavalkya asked the sun if there was one greater than he. Surya recommended the cloud, because the cloud could cover his rays.

When the cloud came, the girl deemed him too black and cold. The cloud was asked if there was anyone greater than he. He suggested the mountain, who alone could stop his progress.

When the mountain came before the sage, the girl said he was too rough and stony. And the mountain, when asked, recommended the king of mice as his superior, because he and the other mice made holes in him.

When the king of mice was called, the mouse-girl immediately agreed, thrilling with ecstasy. She begged Yajnavalkya to make her a mouse again, and it was done.

Devi, Karttikeya, Brahmendra Avadhuta, Aurobindo – these had been my Yajnavalkya, sun, cloud and mountain. Devi had transformed me with tantra, but I could not be wedded to a ‘great’ who could complete the transformation. Now I was back in the mousehole. I’d gotten warnings from the girl in Mahabalipuram and my friend at the Shivananda Yoga Mission. But whimsy prevented my heeding them. Now whimsy dictated I should revel in this hole I’d fallen into.

I applied the same investigative attitude in this field as I’d had in the others. I moved out of the room I’d shared with Shankara Subrahmania and got a place in Salem’s red-light district. I got to know practically every prostitute in town, not simply to slake my flesh, but to study the consciousness of prostitution: the stories of the girls’ lives, their dreams, their fears.

There was one who was very different from the rest. She was a high society girl who lived with her mother in a well-furnished home in a wealthy neighborhood. She was beautiful, intelligent, an expert conversationalist, a talented singer, and went by the Sanksrit name Charulata (‘Moon Vine’).

Only rich businessmen could afford her. I didn’t have that kind of money, so I used to visit her just to talk. In her I found a sympathetic friend like I’d never had before – one with whom I

could speak freely from the heart, and whose advice was always sincere and helpful. For someone as wretched and misunderstood as I was at this stage of my life, Charulata was like an exotic, perfumed houri descended from the heaven of the prophets, sensuous yet angelic, full of grace and understanding. And she found a shelter in me, for secretly the life of a prostitute disgusted her. I was the only person she dared confess this to. Our friendship soon deepened into love, though we could not admit it to each other.

Charulata's mother was herself a former prostitute who acted as her manager. The mother didn't care for my visits since I only wasted her daughter's time without paying for it. But over the weeks, I scraped and saved enough money to finally be able to consummate our relationship. One day I pressed a thick fold of notes into the old lady's hand and told her to get lost for an hour. She scurried to her daughter's room to have a quick word with her, and then left the house.

I found Charulata ashen-faced and trembling. "M-mummy said y-you want to ..." was all she could say before bursting into tears. Covering her face with her hands, she dropped into an upholstered chair and bent her head to her knees, her shoulders heaving with sobs.

I was aghast. "What's wrong with you?"

Her words escaped in gasps from between pitiful cries. "I can't do this sin with you – I only wanted to help you – I thought I might change you – now it has come to this – please go away."

My knees were sagging. I felt helpless, stupid, and cheated.

"How are you going to change me, Charulata? Who do think you are? You're not my wife, sister, or mother. You're a ... well, we both know what you are. So who are you to tell me to leave? I've paid your mother, and I've come to have what's mine."

Still bent double, she wailed and shook her head, refusing to look at me.

I touched her shoulder; she jumped out of the chair and slapped me. Racked by uncontrollable sobbing, she moved back unsteadily, her eyes swollen, makeup running, hair scattered and tangled. I tried to say something, but she cut me off, her voice choking.

"I always thought of you as a saintly person. I considered myself your disciple. I never saw you like the others. You're not meant for this filth!"

“You’re mad, Charulata. You know I visit prostitutes all over the city. How can a man like me be saintly? What’s come over you?”

She sank into another chair and wiped the tears from her eyes with the end of her sari. Gradually regaining her composure, she spoke of a Vaishnava saint named Bilvamangala, known as Lila Suka before he renounced the world.

“Lila Suka had a courtesan named Chintamani. When he came to her in the middle of a stormy night, she rebuked him, saying ‘If you were as attached to God as you are to my flesh and bones, you’d be a liberated soul.’ He took her words as divine and went to Vrindavan, the holy land of Krishna, and surrendered himself to the Lord’s service. I am begging you, Kannan, please likewise take my words as divine – and go.”

“You’re not being fair. Any other man can walk in here with money and have your body. But to me, you say this.”

Her hands were in her lap now. She studied them for a moment. Then she looked up at me, eyes large and somber, her mouth set in determination.

“This is the end of it, Kannan. I cannot go on another day with this life of sin. Now you have to make the same decision in your life. Don’t come back here again, because you won’t find me.”

I turned and walked out onto the quiet, tree-lined street. I didn’t know whether to laugh, cry or fling myself off a bridge. My head pounded with insane echoes of my useless, useless life. The world trembled, its imagery crazy and disconnected, like glass shards hanging in the frame of a shattered mirror.

Word had gotten around of my prostitute-hunting, and though I didn’t mind so much the ribbing I had to take for it at work, it was an embarrassment to learn that my mother had found out. While I was at home on a weekend visit, she delicately brought up the subject of marriage.

“I’ve made an arrangement for you, Kannan. A nice girl...”

“Oh, you mean the girl from the Iyengar family?”

Mum blinked. “Yes, er ... how did you know?”

The ‘tube’ was buzzing with the news. I told Mum the name of the girl and the address of her home. I even described the sacred pictures her family kept on display inside. When we arrived at the family’s house (which Mum had not yet visited), she was shocked to find that everything within was as I said it would be.

Unfortunately for my poor mother, the impression I made on the family was so peculiar that the marriage proceedings died in the egg. Afterward, she was more disgusted with me than I’d ever seen in my life. “You should commit suicide,” was all she could tell me. For an Indian woman, that was probably the strongest rebuke she could make to a son.

I’d hardly reached manhood and had become a shambling clown, despised even by my own mother.



I become ‘Swami Atmananda’

## Chapter Six

It was the end of June, 1974. As per a recent agreement with the workers’ union, the company was to dispense a semi-annual cash bonus along with this month’s regular pay allotment. Our department’s job was to do the calculation of each employee’s bonus percentage. But two of our men had gone on leave. SVS was in a fix – how would all this work be finished before payday, tomorrow?

I bailed him out by working late, doing the jobs of three men, including the arithmetic, the counting of the cash and the sorting of the pay envelopes. Shortly before ten o'clock, the night watchman came by the office and looked in.

"How can you finish all this tonight? Is it that you're not coming to work tomorrow?"

I brushed him off with a confident grin, assuring him that I was nearly done and there were no problems. Nodding, he ambled out. But his suggestion that I would not work here tomorrow sunk in.

Right then and there my determination to go on with life as I'd been living it crumbled around me. I'd been visiting as many as two prostitutes a day while keeping up a phoney mystical aura about myself. All I had done was make myself look ridiculous to Charulata, the only person who really mattered to me. Even Mum was fed up. And on top of that I was caged like a wild beast in the TVS organization. I wanted out.

I completed the work at ten. I signed the register for my own pay envelope and pocketed it. The watchman let me out of the building and through the security gate onto the street. I stood in front of the factory for a moment, gazing at its monolithic bulk that seemed to glow a sinister dull red under the harsh spotlights. "Not in this lifetime again", I swore under my breath.

I took an autorickshaw to my apartment in the brothel district. My roommate at this time, Mr. Joseph, was the headmaster of a Christian school. It was his habit to get drunk every evening, and this evening he was dead drunk. I found the door to the apartment ajar, and him sprawled out on the floor with a bottle still clutched in his fist.

I left a note on my bedroom mirror to whomever would come looking for me on behalf of the company: "Please don't look further. I have left Salem. If I ever become useful I will come back." I extracted ten 20-Rupee notes from my pay envelope and scribbled a message for Mr. Joseph on the back: "Please send this money to my mother." Pocketing the Rs. 200, I lay the envelope and my apartment key on the floor mattress in his room; I knew this was one task old Mr. Joseph could be trusted with. After all, he was a good Christian.

I tiptoed around his snoring form and exited the apartment, closing the door softly behind me. It was almost eleven. The front door of the rooming house faced a through-city highway on which express busses to Madras drove. Waiting under a flickering defective neon tube struggling for its life amidst a swirling cloud of bugs, I was only half-aware of the raucous night life that swirled around me.

Soon a bus came and I stepped out into the street and waved it down. A skinny wooly-headed conductor with a few days growth of beard opened the rear door. I tried to enter but he blocked my way. "You're going to which place?"

I asked back, "Well, where does the bus go?" He repeated his question and I repeated mine.

He cursed and shouted, "What a stupid conversation for this time of night! Just get in here!" I boarded and the bus roared off. After half an hour of eyeing me strangely, the conductor sat down on the next seat and said with a nervous laugh, "I think now you'll tell me where you're going, isn't it?" In a wooden voice I replied, "I'm still asking you where this bus is going." He shook his head as if talking to an idiot and sighed wearily, "This bus is going Arakkonam." I paid the fare without further comment.

We pulled into Arakkonam shortly before dawn and I disembarked in front of the railway station. Nearby I saw a hotel with a spear painted over the entrance; the signboard said 'Shakti Vel.' The only availability there was a single room with a common bath and toilet down the hall. I took it.

I had no luggage with me, just the pants, kurta and slip-on shoes I was wearing, and my money. Dazed from the night journey and my own inner distress, I sat listlessly in the dingy room for a while. Then I thought of going to the bathroom. Stepping out into the hall, I noticed that a light was on in the room opposite mine. I heard a mother talking with her son and daughter inside – and I recognized the voices. This was the family of my uncle Bala Subrahmanian from Kerala!

I froze, my heart pounding. Listening at their door, I could understand they were on their way to the pilgrimage town of Tirupathi to visit the famous Venkateshwara Swami temple, some seventy-five kilometers north of here. They would soon depart the hotel by car and would pay a quick visit to a Kartikeya temple just beyond Arakkonam at a place called Tiruthani. If they saw me now, my plan of leaving everything would fail. I withdrew silently into my room and sat on the edge of the bed in total anxiety, thinking, "Why did I come to this town? Why did I take this lodge?"

At seven o'clock I heard them leave. I rushed into the bathroom with a bursting bladder, relieved myself, and then went downstairs to tell the man at the desk, "I'm vacating." His jaw dropped. "What! You just arrived!" I paid and walked out onto the sunlit street. The small town center of Arakkonam had come to life with jingling bicycles, honking traffic and a group of marching pilgrims singing songs in praise of Kartikeya.

These pilgrims were villagers on their way to visit Tiruthani. Some of them carried kaveri, gaily decorated boxlike structures made from light wood. These they supported on their shoulders to

ceremonially transport brass pots of water or milk meant for offering to the murti. I apathetically fell in step with them, having nothing else to do. Singing and dancing around me, they swept me along.

It wasn't many minutes before we had left Arakkonam behind. The pilgrims kept up their celebrations as we trekked across the arid, treeless landscape. Though the asphalt road we followed sometimes brought us near rocky hills that abruptly reared a hundred meters or so up into the brilliant morning sky, the land here was generally flat, and appeared uninhabited.

After about an hour we came to Tiruthani Temple, situated on the peak of a hill. A big stone stairway rose majestically from the roadside to the entrance gate. The temple was crowned by a distinctively-shaped vimana (main tower) signifying that the deity within is Kartikeya. Around the building stood a high wall painted with red and white vertical stripes, a feature of many temples in South India.

Tiruthani means "the lord's garden". Lord Kartikeya is believed to have landed here from Kailash (the heavenly abode of his father Shiva) and taken a little rest in a garden at the top of this hill before going to the ocean shore at Tiruchendur to kill the demon Surapadma.

I climbed up the stairs with my companions who now sang prayers asking favors from the murti. I was numb, almost catatonic when I got to the top. "What is my life for?", I moaned half-audibly.

At this point religion, philosophy and mysticism meant nothing to me, despite all my high-flown pretensions of the past. I was utterly frustrated with myself. I would have welcomed death had I believed it would really end my existence forever, but I feared rebirth even more. In a way, I yearned for something that would lift me to a higher state. But at the same time I doubted there was any hope for me.

Now inside the temple's dark massively pillared interior, the pilgrims were respectfully silent. I shuffled listlessly before the murti of Kartikeya. He stood between his two wives Valli and Devasena, the three of them black and glistening in the glowing lamplight. The priest chanted a prayer that said "May all the bad results of sinful deeds be destroyed by your spear." With my eyes shut tight in desperation and my palms pressed together before my face, I prayed: "Please give me some direction."

I stumbled out into the bright sunshine with a buzzing head and wearily started down the stairs. At a small mandapa I saw an wizened old beggar sitting in the shade. I sat down next to him and

we started talking. He asked me “Where are you going?”, just as I asked him, “Where should I go?”

He looked at me a little startled, working his toothless jaws. “You are asking me?”

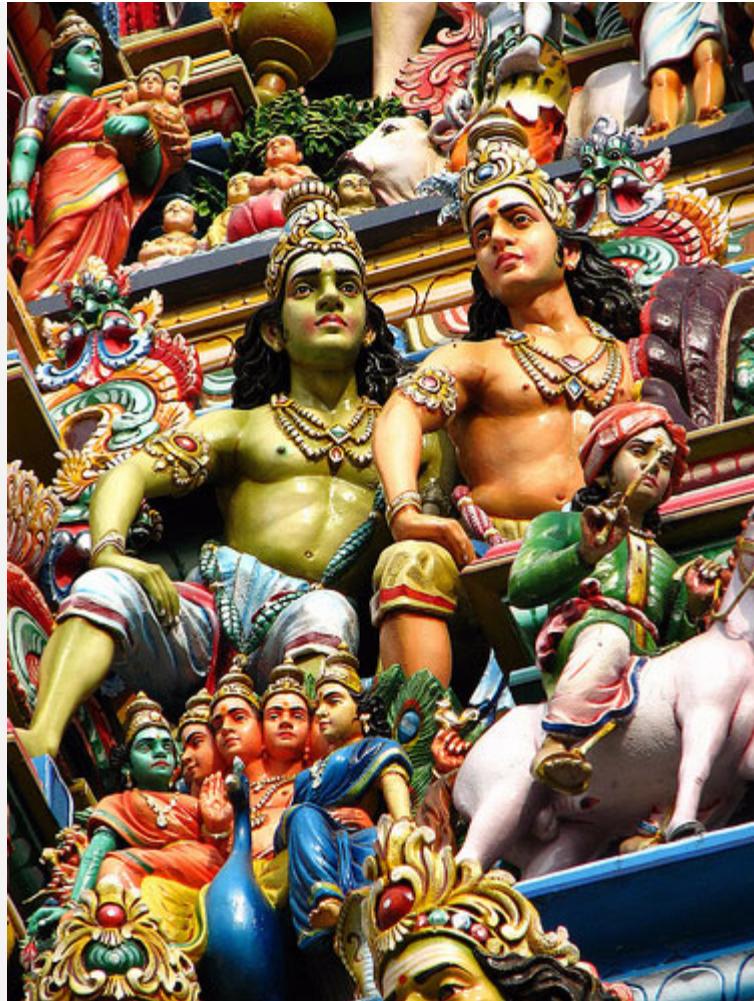
“Yes. I don’t know where I should go at this point in my life.”

“Then go to Tirupathi.”

“No, I don’t think I should go there, because someone who will spoil my plan has just left for there.”

“No, no, don’t worry about that!” he snorted. His conviction caught my attention. “You must go there. Your plan will become successful; no one will stop you.” He then quoted a poetic couplet:

“When Kartikeya was dissatisfied by not getting the fruit, he came to the south.” This referred to Kartikeya’s losing a test of wits to his brother Ganesh, who received as a prize a fruit from the hand of the sage Narada; in frustration, Kartikeya retired from Kailash to Tiruthani, in South India.



**Tiruthani**

“Kartikeya went south,” the old beggar continued, “but you – you go north.”

I gave him a few coins and walked to the bottom of the stairs, got on a northbound bus and rode across the Tamil Nadu-Andhra Pradesh border to Tirupathi. All the way I glumly mulled over why I was bothering to make yet another pilgrimage to see one more mute stone idol.

Venkateshwara Swami is one of India’s most popular Vishnu deities. He is known by the name Sri Balaji to pilgrims from the north, but Srinivasa is the name we southerners prefer. Srinivasa means “the Abode of Sri”, Sri being Lakshmi, the Goddess of Fortune.

According to the Ramayana and the Puranas, in ancient times Lord Vishnu descended to earth from the spiritual realm as Prince Ramachandra. His consort Lakshmi descended as the beautiful

Sita, Rama's wife. When the demon-king Ravana attempted to kidnap Sita, the fire-god Agni tricked him by substituting Vedavati for Rama's spouse. Thus Ravana took Vedavati with him to his island kingdom of Lanka, thinking she was Sita.

Vedavati was actually an illusory form of Lakshmi. She had previously appeared as a princess over whom Ravana had lusted; she flung herself into fire rather than endure the demon's attentions. As she disappeared into the flames, Vedavati placed a curse on Ravana, saying she would return to destroy him and his dynasty. But as the divine energy of Lord Vishnu, she was not burned. Agni kept Vedavati with him and they waited for Ravana to make his move against Sita. When Ravana abducted Vedavati, mistaking her for Sita, the real Sita was then sequestered with Agni.

It was Rama's purpose all along to destroy Ravana and his race of man-eaters. Accepting the mood of a husband whose beloved wife was in great peril, Rama attacked Lanka and destroyed Ravana and his kinsmen. But after recovering her, Rama ordered her to enter fire, as she had been defiled by the touch of a sinful demon.

Ever-faithful, she did as she was told – and Agni emerged from the flames bringing with him both the real Sita and Vedavati. Though Agni requested Rama to accept Vedavati as a second wife, Rama refused, saying, "I have vowed in this descent to have only one wife. I will accept Vedavati when I appear on earth as Srinivasa. She will then be known as Padmavati and be my bride."

As Srinivasa, Vishnu wed Padmavati. But Lakshmi (Sri) came to disturb the marriage, claiming it was invalid because Srinivasa is always hers. As Sri and Padmavati quarreled, Srinivasa took seven steps back and became a murti. The heartbroken goddesses wailed in sorrow, but Srinivasa consoled them by telling them that they were both expansions of the same spiritual potency, the Vishnu-shakti. The two goddesses embraced each other and then stood on either side of Srinivasa. Indeed, Lakshmi and Padmavati assumed murti forms themselves.

The Venkateshwara temple is a magnet that yearly draws millions of pilgrims from all corners of India. A common sacrifice these pilgrims make is head-shaving, which is done by man, woman and child alike. The temple collects hundreds of millions of rupees in donations; much of this money is used to help the poor and provide facilities for pilgrims.

But in my dejected cynicism I wondered, "How is it that a stone in Tirupathi can attract so many pilgrims? Someone was really clever to think up this money-making gimmick."

I arrived in Tirupathi around noon. I boarded a link bus that ferried pilgrims to and from the top of Tirumala hill where the temple and the surrounding complex is situated. The complex is truly a city in itself, for a staff of thousands – priests, administrators, workers and their families – permanently resides there. In addition, there are never less than five thousand visiting pilgrims, and often many more.

After leaving the Tirumala bus stop and passing by well-kept blocks of administrative offices and pilgrims' guest houses, I turned down a wide paved walkway lined by stalls where all sorts of goods were proffered for sale. At the end of this bustling bazaar loomed the gopuram, an ornately carved tower that soared high over the front gate of the temple.

A queue of pilgrims stretched from the cavernous entrance around the side of the wall and back into a series of waiting halls, all filled. I took my place at the end. It was two and a half hours before I got to the Deity.

But in spite of the long wait, I felt my despair fade. It seemed as if I was being inexorably drawn deeper and deeper into a divine mystery as I slowly shuffled along in line past the ancient, intricately carved stone-block structures that marked our approach to the sanctum sanctorum.

I found the mounting ecstasy of the faithful pilgrims around me infectious. As we ascended the few stone steps that brought us up from a vast court into the doorway of the Deity's residence, the excitement of the devotees burst around me in chants of "Govinda! Govinda!" We quickly moved through the crowded entrance area and down the right side of a long corridor that led directly to Srinivasa, suddenly visible over the heads of the throng in front of me.

The line moved swiftly forward. I kept my eyes fixed on the Deity and felt an awesome power drawing me closer and closer that seemed to have nothing to do with the physical factors of the forward motion of the crowd. I was entering into an intense personal exchange with Transcendence.

At the end of the corridor I came before Srinivasa, black in color and bedecked with silver, gold and jewel-encrusted ornaments. The upper portion of the Deity's face was covered by Vishnu tilak, a U-shaped white marking worn on the forehead. The bottom of the "U" should normally just cross the space between the eyebrows, but a distinctive feature of this murti is that the tilak is oversized and covers the eyes. He wore a high conical silver crown topped by a rounded peak. His decorations shimmered prismatically in the light of the votary lamps.

In the brief moment I stood before Srinivasa, I was moved by the remembrance of my mother's exclusive and abiding devotion to Vishnu as the complete form of the Supreme Truth, which

other forms like Shiva and Durga only partially represent. A verse from the Bhagavad-gita crossed my mind: “Abandon all varieties of religion and just surrender unto Me. I shall deliver you from all sinful reaction. Do not fear.”

The darshan area in front the sanctum sanctorum was supervised by young but stern-looking ladies who briskly ushered the pilgrims past the Deity, sometimes with shoves between the shoulder blades of those who lingered too long. I dared not tarry. I turned and followed the queue back up the other side of the long corridor to the exit, looking over my shoulder to get yet another glimpse of Srinivasa. Leaving the residence as quickly as we had entered it, the queue continued on its route through the temple compound to the front gate.

Coming out of the temple from beneath the gopuram, I wandered into the bazaar again. Jostled by the teeming shoppers, I reviewed the emptiness of my life. Just as I was being pushed to and fro in this marketplace, so I had been pushed from one fruitless venture to another, with nothing to show for it. Remembering the Bhagavad-gita again, I decided I must attain that state of deliverance from all reactions to my foolish deeds. I would surrender myself to spiritual life and become a sadhu, a wandering holy man.

From a stall dealing in North Indian clothing I bought lenga (loose-fitting pyjama-like trousers) and a four-meter length of cotton cloth. From another place I got some turmeric. Then I went to the Swami Pushkarini, the large sacred bathing pool next to the temple. Using the turmeric as dye, I colored the trousers and long cloth yellow and set the trousers out to dry.

I got my head shaved by one of the straight-razor barbers squatting on the concrete steps around the pool. Removing my clothing, I wrapped myself in the long cloth and immersed myself in the holy waters, dipping three times. As I came out, a man passing by paused to apply a dab of moist white clay from within a small brass bowl in his hand to my forehead, deftly making the tilak mark with one stroke of a finger. I took this as a sign of the Lord’s acknowledgment of my desire to surrender.

After I and my yellow-dyed clothing had dried, I donned the lenga and wrapped my head turban-style with the middle part of the long cloth, bringing the two lengths of excess down from the back of my neck over each shoulder. I crossed the lengths at the chest and tied them around my waist.

I placed my old shirt and pants in the bag I’d gotten from the cloth stall and left my slippers at the pool. I still had 150 rupies. I decided to donate this to Srinivasa.

At the temple entrance, I saw the counter for the “special darshan” costing twenty-five rupees. This allowed one to cut his waiting time in the queue to around a quarter of an hour. I decided to have six special darshans and exhaust my money.

Coming before Srinivasa the sixth time, I noticed that I was still carrying the bag of old cloth in my hand. In my mind I asked the murti, “You are known as Hari, ‘He who takes away our material attachments’. How will You take this bag from me?”

As I exited the long corridor and entered the front room of the residence, I noticed a bearded brahmin sitting in a cordoned-off area there. He was big-bodied and bare-chested, his forehead, torso, arms and spine adorned with twelve tilak marks, signifying him to be a temple priest. He was grinding paste from a block of moist sandalwood by rubbing it on piece of flat sandstone. I broke from the line and kneeled down near him to watch. The sweet-scented sandalwood paste mixed with a little saffron or camphor was applied to the body of the murti as a refreshing cosmetic. But this was usually done just after the early morning bathing ceremony; now it was mid-afternoon.

I was just going to ask him if there was a special puja (worship) about to happen when he looked up at me and asked, “What do you have in that bag?”

“Oh, just some clothing,” I said, opening the bag so that he could see.

Noticing my old kurta, a style of shirt not often seen in South India, he said, “This shirt is very nice. If you’re not needing it anymore, can you give it to me?”

I protested, not wanting to give a temple priest my old caste-offs. But he was so insistent that I relented on the condition that he arrange a special darshan of Srinivasa for me, one in which I could stand as long as I liked before the Deity.

He readily agreed. He set the bag on a nearby shelf and took me firmly by the hand, leading me through the crowd to the long corridor.

The length of the corridor was divided down the middle by a special aisle about one meter wide that was sectioned off from the rest of the corridor by metal hand rails. This served a double purpose: it separated the incoming queue from the outgoing and allowed authorized persons a free route to the darshan area. One could enter this aisle through a metal gate where the donation box stood. A police guard in an olive drab uniform and beret was posted nearby.

The big bearded brahmin unlocked the gate with a key dangling at his waste and led me into the aisle between the rails. He strode ahead, pulling me behind him until we came to the darshan area where the pilgrims passed between us and the Deity.



**Tirupati Balaji**

He stood next to me while I viewed Srinivasa to my heart's content. I wanted to indelibly impress my mind with the form of the Lord, so I began by meditatively studying each part of that form, beginning with the feet. I gradually brought my eyes up to the Lord's two hands, the left one held in the mudra of pushing down misery, and the right one in the mudra of benediction. In another two hands the symbols of Vishnu (the disc and the conch) were held just above shoulder level. I studied the slightly smiling expression on Srinivasa's face and wondered if it indicated

satisfaction or amusement, or perhaps something even deeper. Again I moved my eyes back to the feet of the Lord and repeated my meditation twice over.

After that I studied Sri on the Lord's right and Padmavati on His left. And then I took in the whole scene, the backdrop, the floor, the ceiling. I estimated I'd stood there for five or six minutes.

Finally I looked at the brahmin. He nodded his head and turned. Halfway back to the gate he motioned that I should slip over the handrail and leave with the line of exiting pilgrims. I did so, and he went ahead to the gate and let himself out.

When I got to the front room, I went back to his place, wanting to thank him before I left. But he was not there. Nor was my bag on the shelf. Nor was there even any evidence that he'd been making sandalwood paste some minutes before.

A little confused, I went to two other brahmins who were sitting nearby. "Excuse me," I spoke politely, "where is the bearded brahmin who was here a short while ago?"

They eyed me a bit strangely. "Bearded brahmin?" snorted one. The other laughed, "You think this is a Shiva temple?" True, I reminded myself, Vaishnava brahmins don't wear beards.

"He was making sandalwood paste over there," I pointed. One of the brahmins shook his head. "No, that's not done at this time. You'll have to come back at six tomorrow morning if you want to meet the brahmin who does that duty. He's gone home hours ago."

I was beginning to wonder if I was dreaming now or had been dreaming when I was with the man with the beard. "But he took me to have darshan through the gate. Didn't you see me?"

They both looked at each other and chuckled. One said, "We couldn't help but see you, because we've been here the whole time. You went through the darshan queue again and again. We thought you were mad. But you were not with a bearded brahmin, and you did not go through the gate."

Leaving them joking merrily between themselves, I went to the guard and asked him if he'd seen me go through the gate. "Don't waste time here!" he shouted in Telegu. "Move along!"

"Please, just give me a moment," I implored. "I was brought through this gate a few minutes ago by a brahmin, and you were standing right here. Didn't you notice us?"

“And who do you think you are, the peshkar (head priest)?” he sneered. “It’s my job to make sure only VIP’s get through this gate. And you don’t look like a VIP to me.”

“Well, in that case I think a miracle has happened,” I gulped. He motioned me to the door and told me brusquely, “People have visions here every day. That’s nothing special. Go home and don’t worry about it.”

I came out of the residence in a daze.

Passing through the pavilion where prasadam (sanctified food offered to the Deity) is distributed, I accepted a plate of rice and dahl beans as my first bhiksha, or begged meal. I vowed from then on to live only by begging, and named myself Swami Atmananda.

After leaving the temple compound I returned to the bazaar, moving in the direction of the bus stand. I had to push through swarms of newly-arrived pilgrims excitedly rushing to the darshan queue. Finally I reached the thoroughfare where I saw some share taxis picking up passengers for the ride downhill.

There were eight people in a car closeby; a man called to me from the back seat and asked, “Would you like a ride down with us?” “Yes I would,” I answered, “but I have no money.” He waved me over as the door opened: “I’ll pay your fare, just come.”

I squeezed in and we started down the winding road to Tirupathi. All the way I was absorbed in deep contemplation on what had happened to me in the temple. I asked myself who the bearded brahmin could have been: “Perhaps Srinivasa come in disguise?” I doubted that. He surely wouldn’t personally look after such a wretch as I.

My old skepticism reasserted itself: “The whole thing was imagination.” But I clearly remembered standing before the sanctum sanctorum for several minutes. So many pilgrims passed between where I was standing and the murti. I could still see these people in my mind’s eye with their various dress styles from all over India, and the many shaven-headed women, all being hurried along by the female attendants. As I mused this over, I realized another very strange thing: I couldn’t remember the form of Srinivasa at all. Just the silver conch and disc. The rest was ... blocked.

“Well, maybe I didn’t really stand there so long,” I fitfully surmised. But I simply could not convince my intelligence that it did not happen. After all, the bag full of clothing was gone. I recalled how I had mentally challenged Srinivasa to take even that last possession away; mysteriously, my challenge had been met.

At last I just shook my head and smiled to myself. With a glow of inner satisfaction I thought, “I don’t know how, but today I’ve been liberated.” I had to admit that despite all my doubts this clever trickster Lord Srinivasa had definitely changed my life for the better. I felt spiritually purified, completely refreshed and, for the first time in perhaps years, optimistic.

The taxi stopped at the bottom of the hill next to a huge statue of Hanuman. Everyone got out, they to eat at a roadside kitchen and I to begin my wanderings as a mendicant. I walked the rest of the distance to Tirupathi town and stopped at the Govindaraja Swami Perumal, another beautiful Vaishnava temple. I stood before the Deity with my palms pressed together before my chest. “Now I am finished with material life”, I vowed. “Now my spiritual life must begin.”

As I left Govindaraja, it crossed my mind that I knew precious little about spiritual life except that a swami should beg for his needs. I had so much to learn, and needed someone to learn it from.

Nearby I noticed a police station. I walked in, found a well-built, mustachioed inspector at his desk and sat down in front of him. He looked up and, seeing my sadhu dress, asked respectfully, “How can I help you?” I noticed a portrait of Sai Baba on the wall of his office and took this as an opportunity. “I want to go to Sai Baba’s ashram. How can I get there from here?” Under the inspector’s glass desktop cover I spied many more Sai Baba photos.

He brightened visibly upon hearing me mention Sai Baba and replied enthusiastically, “You go from here to Anantapur by bus, then change buses there for Bukkapatnam, and there catch the bus for Sai Baba’s Ashram.”

Thanking him, I pushed back my chair to rise. Then I paused, and choosing my words carefully, took the first hesitant step in my new “spiritual life.”

“Excuse me, but I have no money. Would you be able to help me in meeting the expense for this journey?”

His smile did not waver. “Oh, I am very happy to send someone to Sai Baba, the avatar of the modern age. But I have nothing here. Just go down the road until you see a shop called Srinivas Wines. My wife works there – you tell her I sent you for bus fare to Sai Baba’s Ashram and she will be most happy to give it to you.”

Following his directions, I soon came to the wide entrance of a shop that opened to the street without a front wall or door of any kind. A considerable variety of shapes, sizes and colors of

bottled liquor was shelved inside; the walls behind the shelves were mirrored to make the stock look twice as voluminous. Above the entrance I read the red and white sign: "Srinivas Wines".

In the back of the shop, under a framed and garlanded color poster of Lord Srinivasa, sat a fat lady in a sari. I stepped inside and greeted her with "Sai Ram", the motto used by the Baba's followers. She returned the "Sai Ram" and politely gave me a seat. I told her why I'd come and she was very moved. Opening a drawer, she took out a wad of notes and placed it in my hand.

"May I send somebody to get the ticket for you and bring you to the bus?" she asked humbly, eager to do more service. "No need," I replied dismissively, getting into the feel of a swami's aplomb. "Your husband's directions will be sufficient." As I stood up to leave, I momentarily saw my face reflected among the wine bottles. My Vishnu tilaka had rubbed off, and with my big turban and confident air, I looked like the famous Swami Vivekananda.

The way to Sai Baba's Ashram proved to be rough. I got on the Anantapur bus at 5:30 PM and it drove the whole night before arriving at the last stop, several hours behind schedule. From there I caught a southbound bus to Bukkapatnam, bouncing for 50 kilometers more on a hard narrow seat.

The area around the sun-drenched country town had enjoyed a measure of notoriety even before the advent of its resident mystagogue Sai Baba. In olden times it was a place of cobra worship. On the top of a hill called Uravakonda sits a huge boulder in the shape of a hooded serpent; legend has it that whoever is bitten by a snake from this place will never recover.

The first welcome I got upon my arrival at Sai Baba's ashram was from a large group of ragged beggars sitting outside the front gate. Past them, flocks of well-off people crowded into the compound; that meant Sai Baba was here now. I viewed this scene with decidedly mixed feelings.

"He is supposed to be God", I considered, "and his followers say he has the power to remove misfortune, disease and poverty – so why are these beggars loitering here just outside his own house? And if his disciples are really so blessed, why don't they do something more for these poor people than just give them a few coins?"

With these misgivings, I entered the spacious and rather beautiful ashram compound. In the middle stood Sai Baba's residence, a large apricot-colored building called the Mandir; before it, on a stretch of sandy soil called the 'darshan area', perhaps a thousand people sat on their haunches in rows, waiting for Sai Baba to appear on the upper-floor balcony. Beyond the crowd

was a round, roofed stage, the Shanti Vedika. Nearby that, pilgrims were camped in large open sheds.

Other buildings, arrayed around the compound wall, faced the Mandir. I noticed a small hospital. I'd heard that just by eating the holy ash (vibhuti) that Sai Baba mysteriously produces from his hand, the diseases of the faithful were cured. Reading the sign listing the visiting hours of the doctors, I wondered why, if he had the power to cure with ash, he needed a hospital staffed with Western-trained physicians.

A big, bearded and bright-turbaned Sikh came walking past the darshan area. I fell in step with him and asked where he was going, and he told me he was on the way to the canteen to get something to eat. We got to talking; he asked me about myself, and I told him I'd left everything for spiritual life. "I am searching for God," I said with a mild smile, "so I came to see if God is really here."

He flashed a mischievous grin. "Well, I don't believe in any of these so-called avatars, but I happened to be on business nearby and somebody told me Sai Baba is God, so I just dropped in here to see what this God is up to." He chuckled. Then he looked at me quizzically and asked, "You have no money?"

"No", I replied.

Stopping, he held up a forefinger and declared sonorously, "Don't worry, God is here, and he will not feed you." We both burst out laughing.

Still laughing, I said, "Well, God may not feed me, but you are here, so why don't you buy me breakfast?"

"Oh, no problem", he exclaimed heartily. Slapping me on the back, he lead me into the canteen. "What's your name?"

"Swami Atmananda."

"Oh, you're a swami?"

"Yes, I just became swami yesterday." We had another big laugh.

The canteen served the usual South Indian fare of idli, dosa and sambar. I was ravenous, and the Sikh was obliging. “Eat up,” he urged, ordering more dosas for me, “because God won’t feed you, and I’m leaving in half an hour. Whatever you want, you take. Don’t worry.” I packed it in, and he paid for it happily.

Coming out of the canteen, he pointed me to the inquiry office, telling me if I had any questions, I could get them answered there. We bade each other fond farewells. Then I entered the office and browsed through some of the books on display there. From a volume of his lectures on the Ramayana, I gleaned that Sai Baba’s teachings consisted of standard Advaitist platitudes and little else. Well aware that Advaita philosophy is the de rigueur of all popular Hindu gurus, I was not impressed.

Putting the book back, I asked a man in the office if there was a room I might have. This gentleman, Mr. N. K., turned out to be the chief assistant to Sai Baba in the ashram. He answered my question by quoting the prices of guest facilities.

“But I have no money. I want to stay here for two weeks. Can’t you give me a place to live?”

“I am so sorry,” N.K. answered with resigned finality, “but we don’t have such arrangements. If you wish to stay for free, you may kindly move into the pilgrims’ sheds.”

I changed the subject. “I’d like to see Sai Baba. Is there a way to do that?”

“Oh,” he smiled benevolently, “seeing God is not so easy. Just see...” he motioned towards the darshan area where the crowd sat expectantly in the sun. “Today they’ve been waiting for two hours. Some have been here for months, not leaving. No one knows when he will come down to see them. It is all divine.”

Leaving Mr. N.K., I entered the darshan area and sat down in a vacant space in one of the rows. On my right was a Chettiar (a member of the Tamil merchant community). He started telling me about a daughter of his who could not speak; he’d left home and business “to get the God to give her a voice. I’ve been here seven days – no darshan! My time has not come. I don’t know what I will do now.” His lips quivered and he abruptly turned away, his eyes brimming with tears.

All I could think was, “What am I doing here?” I stood up and left the compound through the gate. I walked down the sandy road to some whitewashed buildings ahead of me and noticed a cloth shop that had a ‘Lodging’ sign above a side entrance. Inside were four rooms for rent. Not seeing anyone, I sat down on the steps outside.

I was considering how gullible these Sai Baba followers seemed to be when a man came out of one of the rooms as if to leave. I greeted him with “Sai Baba” and he echoed my greeting.

I asked him, “What are you doing here and what prayer do you have?”

He was a bit astonished at my cryptic question and knelt down next to me, asking excitedly, “Where is Swami from?”

I made another mysterious statement: “Swami is from wherever he is. Just tell me – what is your prayer?”

He was flustered. “Oh, but Swami knows my prayer.”

I gazed at him stonily. “That may be, but still we should say our prayers openly.”

He was trembling when he answered. “I am doing a big business, and I am not sure what is the outcome, so I need blessings.”

I paused, mysteriously surveying the sky as if consulting the gods. Then riveting him again with my eyes, I asked, “What time do you go for darshan?”

“Oh, I was thinking of going now, but I’ve heard there are so many people. I have tried six times to see Sai Baba. I’m not complaining, you understand, it must be my sinful karma, but my time has not come.”

I said with finality, “I want to go with you for darshan. Also, where are you staying?”

“I am staying here. The owner of this shop is my relative.”

“I want to stay with you. I have no place.”

“Oh, certainly! I should be very happy to have a swami stay with me. Swamis don’t often come here, because they don’t understand that Sai Baba is God. Only very rarely is it revealed to them that the God they are seeking is Sai Baba. So you please come with me.”

He took me into his room and asked about my bags. I answered disdainfully, “The whole world is my bag.” I refreshed myself and took a light nap. Then we both went to the darshan area.

We sat down in the first row. I could not help but think how foolish all this was: “If these people think that they can’t see Sai Baba because their time hasn’t come, then who is more powerful, time or him?”

Suddenly he appeared on the balcony, holding up his right palm in the abhaya-mudra blessing. I observed him intently. After seeing how easy it was to influence his disciples, I wanted learn more. Somewhere in the back of my mind a plan was brewing.

His long frizzy hair formed a black halo around his face. He wore a long-sleeved iridescent orange silk gown that reached to the floor. He flitted downstairs quickly like a wraith. I watched his walk, his gestures, his facial expressions. He moved ever nearer to me along the first row, taking letters from people and holding them in his left hand. Finally he went past on to the end.

I noted that as he went down the row he motioned a few people to stand. Mr. N.K. quickly gathered them in a group.

Without going on to the seven rows behind, Sai Baba came back the same way. He stopped in front of my new roommate and looked at him closely. My friend stared back goggle-eyed, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat. Abruptly Sai Baba turned away from him and looked at me, motioning with his finger that I should stand. I really didn’t know what was going on, because this was my first time here.

My friend was bursting with excitement: “Oh, you have been called! Sai Baba has granted your interview! Please, can you mention my case to him? Ask a blessing for me!” As I got up, he touched my feet. N.K. directed me to join the other chosen ones.

Meanwhile Sai Baba passed swiftly through the other rows, almost as if he was floating. After finishing, he came back our way and nodded to Kasturi, saying in Telegu, “Send them up.” Then he went upstairs.

I walked up right behind him with Kasturi. As he reached the balcony at the top of the stairs, Sai Baba threw all the letters into a big metal cannister. Then he turned left and went inside his quarters. Kasturi showed us into the interview room on the right. There were six of us. We sat down on sofas to wait.

Sai Baba entered the interview room through a door that opened from his quarters. Everybody rose with palms joined in pranam-mudra. Out of politeness, I also got up. I had a close look at his eyes; they seemed staring and unfocused.

He gave ash to a couple of people – I saw it clearly materialize from his fingers. Near me stood a girl of about ten with her father. When Sai Baba came to her he set two earrings that just appeared in his hands into the lobes of her ears. Father and daughter gasped in astonishment, for her ears had not been pierced before. Now they were, and hung with gold.

Seeing this feat, everyone cried “Sai Baba! Sai Baba!” in great wonderment. Then, without acknowledging me with so much as a glance, he turned back and exited from whence he came.

A moment later N.K. came in through the same door and announced, “The interview is over; everyone should go now. He did not speak with you, but you are very fortunate, for you saw a miracle of Sai Baba’s power.” He waved everybody to the door that opened on the balcony, and we stood to leave.

I followed the father and daughter, but N.K. stopped me with an outstretched hand. “Please continue to sit. Sai Baba wants you to wait here comfortably.” I nodded, a bit nonplussed, and retook my seat. As soon as the room was cleared, Sai Baba came in again. This time he looked different.

He didn’t have that entranced, almost dazed look I’d seen on his face before. Now he appeared completely normal and relaxed. I thought irreverently, “This is interesting: mad looks for the masses.”

He stood in front of me. This time I didn’t get up. Speaking in Sanskrit, he asked me how I was feeling and if everything was all right. I replied in Tamil, “I do not know Sanskrit; please speak to me in your native tongue.” He switched to his Telegu and asked the same question. Conversation was now possible, because Telegu and Tamil are quite similar.

I answered, “By God’s grace, everything is alright. I have a place to stay, and my plan is to visit the ashram for two weeks.” He walked around the room as if in thought and came back to me.

“You say you want to visit for two weeks?” I nodded.

“What is your mission?”

Remembering what I’d told the Sikh, I replied, “I am looking for God.”

He suddenly smiled and half-raised his arms, turning the palms of his hands in my direction in what I guessed was a benison. Bending his body slightly at the knees, hips and shoulders, he tilted his head coyly to one side and uttered in a silky voice, “If you can’t find God here, where will you find Him?”

I was not very impressed by this little show, and was beginning to feel uncomfortable. "Well, I'll be here for some time, and I hope to meet with you more..." I mumbled. He looked at me intently and said, "Any time you want, you can see me."

Just then a servant appeared in the doorway to his apartment and gave a signal. Sai Baba waved him off. He turned to me again and asked, "Aren't you hungry?"

It was just about lunchtime, so I answered, "I wouldn't mind to eat something now, but of course I have to arrange that somebody gives me biksha."

He smiled magnanimously. "Eat with me."

I couldn't hide my surprise and I thanked him. He went through the door and I followed. We came into a room that looked like a place for confidential talks. We sat down on both sides of a small round table.

Through a large entranceway I could see into his bedroom. I noted some of the paraphernalia of God: a plush bed, an alarm clock and some medicine bottles on a nightstand, and, behind a half-open door, a flush toilet.

He nonchalantly sang something to himself as the servant brought the lunch on a serving tray. The meal consisted of utma (vegetables fried with farina), achar (hot pickle), fried eggplant and coffee.

The utma, to my surprise, was flavored with onions; I knew that strict sadhus shunned onions, as this food gives rise to passions. Coffee, an intoxicant, would likewise be considered a worldly indulgence. But apparently Sai Baba did not care for these rules. And neither did I, for I'd not been given sannyasa under vows to a guru.

We finished. He got up to wash and gargle, and I did the same. Then with his customary benign smile he nodded his head, indicating that I could go.

As I came down the staircase, I saw the people still sitting in rows, now gazing at me with open mouths. My friend the roommate rushed up to me with a look of awed ecstasy fixed on his face. Others were running up behind him as we met at the bottom of the stairs.

He eagerly inquired, "What happened? After the interview the others came down but Sai Baba kept you with him."

I said with a nonchalant shrug, “Oh, I had lunch with him, that’s all.”

Suddenly it seemed two hundred people were mobbing me. I was pulled towards a fancy lodging block and ended up in a big air-conditioned apartment with a roomful of rich people sitting in front of me. They had locked the door and were guarding it because a big crowd had gathered outside.

It was practically an interrogation session: “What about the miracle with the earrings? And what did Sai Baba say to you?” But I sat silent and serene in the big plush chair they’d given me. In my mind, I was gloating at my sudden change of fortune. I wondered if I could exploit this situation further. I had to find out what being God was really like. “Just do it,” the opportunist within myself crowed. “It’s not a sin; you’re just giving them faith in something higher. This is the life you’ve been waiting for.”

Ignoring their babble, in the relaxed and self-assured manner I’d picked up from him, I began singing “Chitta Chora” (Thief of My Mind), a very well-known Sai Baba song. The entire group froze in a hush. Then one by one they started clapping and singing along enthusiastically until the whole room was in an uproar. The song completed, again I was silent. The proverbial pin would have sounded like a car crash.

Finally, I spoke, softly: “What do you want from me? I am a beggar.”

“Swami,” came the answer, “you’re one of those rare swamis who has accepted Sai Baba as God. Sai Baba has said this is very extraordinary, because he is hiding from those who are engaged in religious and spiritual life. He says that at the end of their sadhana he gives them the darshan they expect – if they worship Rama, he’ll appear to them as Rama. If they worship Shiva, he’ll come to them as Shiva. But as Sai Baba, only very fortunate people can see him.”

I closed my eyes. “But to me”, I murmured, “he is simply a guide.”

Somebody from the back exclaimed, “Ah-hah, what a vision! His guide!” I began to perceive that whatever I said here would be accepted as “nectarean truth.”

Just then a curtain that covered the opened glass door to the balcony moved in the breeze. Seeing this, two ladies in the crowd began to weep. “Sai Baba! Sai Baba is here with us right now!”, they sobbed.

Now I could really see how it worked. One didn’t have to do anything. Such foolish people would create their own “miracle”, propagate it, and make you God.

My friend was there in the crowd, close by. He urged, “Swami, please tell us your experience with Sai Baba.”

“Everybody was sent out,” I began, “but Mr. N.K. asked me to remain seated, and Sai Baba came to me. He spoke to me in Sanskrit.”

They all looked at each other with wide-open eyes. I heard murmurings of “Sanskrit! Veda! Veda coming out of his mouth.”

I continued on, even to the point of standing up to show them the pose he made when he said, “If you can’t find God here, where will you find him?” And I told them how he said anytime I wanted I could have darshan. They hung onto every word.

My friend asked, “Did you speak to him about me?” I shook my head solemnly. He whined, “But I requested you to do that.”

I answered with gravity, “Either you understand he’s God, or you understand he’s an ordinary person. If you think he’s God, then he knows. If you think he’s an ordinary person, you shouldn’t be here. Why should anyone have to recommend your case?”

Someone exclaimed, “That’s the exact thing Sai Baba says! ‘If you think I am God, then why don’t you have faith, and if you don’t think I am, then why are you here?’ Sai Baba speaks the same thing!”

Another lady called from the back, “Swami, one more song? Some nectar for our ears?” So I sang a song about Vishnu, one Sai Baba also sings but which is not his composition. As the afternoon drew on I got hungry. They brought me to the canteen and of course, paid for everything.

As it turned out, my friend had also become a celebrity with these rich people because of his relationship to me. They flocked to him to get my attention, and they flocked to me to get Sai Baba’s attention.

Despite my hidden cynicism about the ‘God’ of the ashram, I was yet quite drawn to him because he had pulled it off so well. Having renounced worldly aspirations, I’d found here a whole new temptation. Nothing arouses ambition in the heart like the fame of another, and though I was loathe to admit it to myself, I envied this ‘God’. The curious thing was that my crass imitation of Sai Baba’s behavior was thought by his followers to be devotion to him.

I was to find out that he thought that way too.

A day or so later I asked my friend to take me around the village. We went to the Chitravati river, but since it was the dry season there was no water, just a sand channel.

On a rocky mound near the riverbed stood a tamarind tree from which Sai Baba is said to have magically plucked mangos and other fruits during his youth. I clambered up the rocks and sat beneath it. At the time I was not aware of the significance Sai Baba's followers attached to this tree; I only happened to go there because it looked like a suitable spot for meditation. I sat in the lotus pose, and my friend sat next to me. With closed eyes I visualized Lord Rama, God's avatar as the prince who defeated the demon Ravana.

When I opened my eyes my friend was sitting close with his hands folded and a doglike look in his eyes, as if expecting some teaching or order from me. He looked so utterly helpless that I had to pity him. I figured the best thing I could do was to get him out of the village, for here his foolishness would only increase.

“You should to go to Bangalore, where Sai Baba has his smaller center. There will be no interview for you here.”

He asked despondently, “Swami, what paap (sin) have I done?”

“You've done many”, I replied. He shivered. “But just do this – go to Bangalore. And Sai Baba may yet see you there.” In the back of my mind I was thinking, “You fool, can't you see you're neither rich enough nor unusual enough – like me – to get Sai Baba's attention?”

Within a few days he left, after arranging with the shop owner my continued stay in his room.

On another day's stroll, I stopped at an old Satyabhama temple on the outskirts of the village. This temple was established by Sai Baba's grandfather, Kondama Raju. It is said that his son Pedda prayed here for a second male child; subsequently, a boy was born who got the name Satya Narayana, known later as Sai Baba.

I found it curious that the temple was in need of repairs as if it was neglected by Sai Baba's followers. By a strange coincidence, I'd arrived at the same time as Sai Baba's older brother, who had come to visit the temple from his home nearby.

I asked him about his famous sibling: “Do you think he is God?”

He waved his hand impatiently. “This is sinful”, he said with faint disgust. “That’s a big mistake he’s making, and God will punish him for it. He was stung by a scorpion when he was a boy, and after that time started babbling about being Sai Baba.

“It may be that when he was stung that baba came into his body,” the brother continued, “but no matter what happened, for him to claim he is Rama and Krishna is wrong. In our family we worship Rama and Krishna as God, but he has taken that position for himself.”

“When his time comes, he will be punished for this blasphemy.”

The significance of the brother’s final statement was not lost on me.

I’d become an overnight junior celebrity at the ashram; in my yellow cloth I stood out in the crowd, and the news that I’d eaten lunch with Sai Baba had spread like wildfire throughout the compound. I often entertained the crowd by singing Sai Baba’s songs in the style I’d learned from him. Twice daily, different rich men fed me at the canteen. Yet despite the attention I was enjoying, I was growing restless. I’d declared myself a seeker of God, but the easy life here diverted me from my intended goal.

On the seventh day, an excited N.K. came up to me in the canteen.

“Sai Baba wants to speak to you.”

“Should I go to the darshan place?”

“No, you just go up to his quarters.”

“What, right now? Just walk in?”

“He’s there waiting to see you!” N.K. was almost frantic, so exasperated was he with my quibbling. “Please, you just immediately go to him! Even I’m not getting such chance of close contact to Sai Baba!”

So, very casually, as if it was the most natural thing in the world, I walked up the stairs to the interview room and sat down. He didn’t come out. Finally I just strolled into the front room where we’d eaten together. But he was not there either. I looked in his bedroom.

On the bed he faced me, reclining on his side, his head supported under a folded arm. As I entered he smiled broadly and lifted his hand in blessing.

I looked around for a place to sit, but there was no chair in the room. Finally I just sat down on the corner of the bed. “N.K. said you want to see me”, I began.

“Yes”, he replied. “I just wanted to ask you if you’ve found God yet.”

“No, I haven’t”.

With a hint of knowing irony in his voice, he said, “Under the tamarind tree you meditated on Rama.”

“Yes, I did”, I replied evenly. “That’s my usual dhyana. I like to meditate on Rama, the ocean of mercy. He protects those who are weak.”

His eyes bored into mine. “But why are you looking for God elsewhere when you sit with him now?”

I let a polite, thoughtful expression register on my face before telling him, “You are a holy man and my elder, and I am very low and sinful. I don’t want to say anything improper to you, please understand, but – you are not God.”

He nodded as I spoke, as if expecting my rejection of his divinity. “All right”, he said when I finished, “as you see me, so I look. If you want to see me as God, I am God. If not, I’m not. But try to understand – that is what God is.” He spoke a little more along this line, peppering his arguments with the usual Advaitist slogans.

I interrupted him. “Excuse me, but I’ve read all this in your Rama Katha book. Now, one time in there you say everybody is Rama, and another time you say that you are Rama. So what do you actually mean? Look, I know you are not Rama. Why don’t you just tell your followers that everyone is Brahman? Isn’t this your philosophy? If it is, then you should know that it is incorrect for you to say ‘everyone is Rama’ or ‘I am Rama’, because Rama is a person, and Brahman is impersonal.”

“Yes”, he replied in a patient tone of voice, as if indulging a wayward child. “But I have realized Brahman, and they have not.”

I got a bit upset at this point. “Then you should make them realize it. But you deliberately keep them in a position inferior to yourself. You are pushing them down, not lifting them up. At great personal sacrifice they are coming here from many miles distant to wait outside for weeks and months just to catch a glimpse of you, and here you are, happily enjoying it all. Even ordinary politicians show more interest in their followers than you do. You just threw all those letters in the can. At least you could read them.”

“Cool down, cool down”, he waved languidly. “As soon as I touch those letters, I know what is in them, and I answer through their karma.”

I stared at him in exasperation, hardly believing what I was hearing. “But karma is always happening. If you act through their karma, what do you need this ashram for? Why do they have to come here to see you? Please don’t mind my boldness, but I am very disturbed by all this. When the curtain moves, these poor people are thinking you are there. They are so gullible, and I am sorry to say I think you are exploiting them.”

“But I was there when the curtain moved”, he said self-contentedly. “You sang Chitta Chora very nicely. I was there.”

Now even more disappointed, I told him, “I know you have mystical powers. You see and hear things ordinary men cannot. So why don’t you use your powers to remove their sufferings once and for all instead of playing them along like this? Why do you keep those who have surrendered to you in ignorance of their eternal spiritual existence? How will they ever get out of this miserable world of birth and death? Just giving earrings doesn’t solve the problems of life.”

“All right”, he said, a hint of resignation in his voice, “you will understand later on.” Then, changing the subject he asked, “You need any help here?”

“No, I am fully protected by God.”

“You don’t give that credit to me?”

“To some extent I do, because these people who are paying for me are your devotees. But I see it is my karma that is supplying my upkeep in this world. And that is true for all those people out there, and that is also true for you. You have a karma that allows you to sit there, and my karma

allows me to sit here. If I had your karma and you had mine, I'd be the 'God' here, and you would be the frustrated one."

He didn't hear me. A change came over him and he sat up, his eyes unfocused and glittering. "I have to go down now", he said in a distant voice. "I will speak with you again." He quickly exited, leaving me in his room alone.

I decided to have a look around. Opening a closet in his bedroom, I found it filled with orange gowns. I wanted to find his stock of ash, having myself previously experimented with teleporting ash with the aid of a mantra. But the room was bare of anything save the bed and a few standard items.

So I sat upon the bed as he did, imitating his pose in jest and admiring myself in the bedroom mirror. Then I got up and looked from the balcony as he ran up and down the rows, generating mass hysteria. The police had to restrain people from mobbing him. Then he went onto the Shanti Vedika stage.

I suddenly felt sorry for him. "This man is like a puppet," I thought. "All these people think he's God, and he believes it himself – but he, and they, are just being guided by some higher force over which he has no control."

I went down to see what he was up to. Onstage, he had the crowd going in full swing. Arms upraised, he lead them in song, which they responded to in a riotous chorus. As the song ended he collapsed into a chair. He was worshiped with incense, lamp and flowers, like a murti in the temple. Then a group of Sanksrit pandits chanted the Rudram and Chamakam prayers, which are meant for Shiva, to him. This was too much for me. I walked out of the compound to my room.

On the morning of the ninth day I decided to go. I went to N.K. and shook his hand, saying, "Thank you and goodbye."

He was surprised: "You're going? I thought you would stay here. You sing so sweetly. We had one swamiji from Hrishikesh who also sang for Sai Baba, and Sai Baba took very nice care of him. He will take care of you too."

"God is taking care of me. What can Sai Baba do? Let him take care of himself first," was my quick reply. "You should watch out for his health – when he gets into those running moods, I think it isn't good for him."

"What?!" N.K. spluttered. "What is this you are telling?!"

“No, never mind, I didn’t say anything”, I reassured him, smiling brightly. I waved him off, saying “Sorry, I’ve got to go now”, and went into the canteen to bid adieu to the manager.

Today there were only about a hundred people gathered at the darshan area. It had been announced that Sai Baba would go to Bangalore; his big foreign-made automobile was ready at his private exit gate.

I went into the Mandir’s ground-floor bhajan hall and made obeisances before the altar upon which the forms of Krishna, Satya-Narayana and Shiva were displayed. As I came out, I looked up and saw Sai Baba motioning to me from the balcony.

I strode up the stairs and found him in the interview room sitting in a chair, his hands on the armrests. I entered, offered him my respects and took a chair facing him.

“So?” he smiled. “Going?”

“Yes,” I smiled back.

“But you said you’d stay two weeks.”

“Sorry, but I’ve become too dissatisfied here. I cannot bear to see these people anymore and all the suffering and anxiety they are putting themselves through for you.”

“Do you know where you will go next?”

“No, I don’t, but I hope to end up in a peaceful place.”

All at once he rose from his seat, his eyes again glittering. He gazed down into my face and intoned meaningfully, “Until you find what you’re looking for, you’ll have no problem for food.”

He lifted his right palm: “I will maintain you.”

“For whatever you are doing for me,” I replied, “I am very thankful. But I don’t accept you as God.”

In an odd voice he prophesized, “You yourself will become God.” He moved his hand forward as if to give me vibhuti.

“No”, I countered, “don’t give me that ash. I don’t want to take it from you like this. Just let me take it from the container.”

“But why won’t you take it from my hand?” he purred.

“Well”, I grinned, “I know it doesn’t originate from your hand, so let me take it from where it really comes.”

“You’re wrong. It does come from my hand”, he insisted.

“Sorry”, I grinned again. “I don’t believe you. Let me take it from the container.”

Without saying another word, he went into his quarters and brought out a small pot filled with ash. Holding it out to me he said simply, “Very well. If you want, take it from here.” I sprinkled a bit on my head.

“Please go happily and remember my words to you.”

I said, “Namaste,” and got up to go. He spoke once more.

“You dislike me, don’t you?”

“No, you’re a nice man. Why should I dislike you?”

“When you find what you’re looking for, you will dislike me,” he said softly in that odd prophetic voice. He left me and I went downstairs and out of the compound.

Relieved to be departing the village, I walked out of town along the main road until I reached the highway. I turned to have my last sight of the ashram. Just then, Sai Baba’s big car glided out of the special gate, drove down the road and turned onto the highway in my direction.

The automobile sidled up next to me, its motor humming. In the back I saw the familiar smiling face ringed by the frizzy hairdo. Next to him was a well-known female singer in an expensive silk sari. As his electric window buzzed down, he told the driver to turn off the engine.

“I’m going to Bangalore”, he called to me. “Would you like to come?”

“No,” I told him. “Now I’m taking my own direction.”

“But you don’t know where you are going.”

“That’s true, but I am going nonetheless.”

He turned to the lady and said, “He doesn’t even know where he’s going. He’s just looking. I tell him to stay, but he says ‘no, I am going.’ I ask him where, he says ‘I don’t know.’ All the time just looking, looking.”

Then I said jokingly, “But like everybody, I am only looking for you.”

Still speaking to the lady he said, “Everybody’s looking for me to become themselves. He’s looking for me to become myself.”

I laughed, a bit embarrassed. I could see he knew my motivations all too well. He turned to me again. “Go to Jilallamuri and see Amma.” Amma was a woman whom many said was an incarnation of a goddess. “You’ll be very happy in Jilallamuri.”

“How shall I get there?”

He said something to the lady. She took 25 rupees out of her handbag and handed the money to him, and he held it out to me.

“You have 25 rupees; it costs 23 rupees eighty to take a bus from here. Just go to the bus stand and wait.”

Taking the money, I waved, “All right, so goodbye. This is the last time we’ll see each other.”

“No, we’ll meet again,” he said gaily. He told his driver to start the engine, and the window buzzed up. Then he was off.

I went to the bus station; the Jilallamuri bus soon came and I boarded it. Rolling through the parched landscape, I reflected on my recent experiences.

Amma lived in the simple village environs of Jilillamuri with her husband and six children. She attracted much bigger crowds at her place than Sai Baba did at the ashram. Like Sai Baba, she

was reputed to have miraculous powers of healing and problem-solving. But unlike him, she arranged that her crowds were fed daily free of charge with a sumptuous feast.

In the morning and the evening she gave lectures dressed in colorful silks, crown and ornaments like Devi. The rest of the day she wore a simple sari and did household chores.

She lived in a no-frills four room house with her family. In the yard she had built a spacious hall for the pilgrims. It wasn't difficult to have audience with her, and it was all the easier for me, for I came dressed as a sadhu and had been sent by Sai Baba.

I found her in the kitchen, cooking for her family. She was a plump, friendly woman with a big sindhur dot on her forehead who looked for all the world like an average Hindu housewife. She fed me first and then we talked.

I told her that I was searching for someone who could show me a higher state of spiritual awareness, and that I had not been satisfied with what I'd seen in Sai Baba. She immediately said, "Oh, then you should go see Bala Yogi." Bala Yogi was an ascetic mystic who lived not far from Jilillamuri.

"Yes, I can go see him also", I replied, "but I see you are very advanced yourself. I am impressed by your simplicity, practicality and especially your charitable attitude to others."

She gazed at me unblinkingly for a moment and then said, "But I cannot help you. You have a great desire to become God. But that is impossible. God is already God. We are like small drops that have been churned out of a big pot of dahi (yoghurt). We can't claim to be the whole pot of dahi; of course at times some people may think we are. But we should tell them we are not. Sai Baba says he is the whole pot. But it's all from the last life. He's left over with some power. Anyway, it is not my policy to criticize."

Just then a man walked in. Amma got up from the table we were sitting at and touched his feet. She introduced him to me as her husband. Assuring him she'd be only a few more minutes, she then turned back to me.

I told her that Sai Baba said I would become inimical to him after I found what I was looking for. She remarked, "I also see many things, but I keep them to myself." I asked her what she meant by 'the whole pot of yogurt', and she explained that it was the totality of everything of which we are only tiny parts. We can only realize that totality through devotion, she said; by devotion she meant service to family, friends and fellow man.

She paused, detecting my skepticism. I commented that I'd heard this explanation before. "I can more or less accept what you say intellectually, but I think the actual realization of this oneness that gurus and avatars speak about is much more difficult than it is admitted to be. That is why I am looking for a teacher who can show me this truth you are telling me about."

"So, that's why I am saying you should go see Bala Yogi," she replied quietly. "You won't find what you want here. Anyway" – she closed her eyes as if meditating on some inner vision – "keep clean inwardly and outwardly. That is the only way to always feel the presence of God in everything."

After taking her blessings, I left. I was impressed by this woman, much more impressed than I was with Sai Baba, but meeting her had not done anything for my growing desire to actually experience transcendental knowledge myself. Outside, I asked the way to Mummidivaram, the village of Bala Yogi. I begged the fare and boarded the bus.

Bala Yogi was an ascetic who had renounced his home when he was only six years old. He came to Mummidivaram and sat down on the ground in meditation, never to move from that place again. It was said he neither ate nor passed stool nor urine after that. Moreover, a cobra snake was his constant companion. A house had been built around Bala Yogi by the faithful, and the people of the village profited greatly from the pilgrims that flocked to see him. But he remained aloof from all this attention.

It was only possible to see him during a period of a few days out of every month. During those days a huge multitude gathered at Mummidivaram to have darshan. It so happened that I arrived there during one of these peak periods. The darshan queue was so long that I supposed it would take me two days of standing in line before I would get a chance to see Bala Yogi. I lost heart and decided to move on.

But while I viewed the scene from a distance, a man hailed me. He'd been sent by a government minister who had noticed me. The minister, thinking by my dress that I'd come all the way from North India, invited me to have a special darshan.

Bala Yogi was said to be fifty years old but looked only thirty, having the wispy beard of a young man and long matted locks of hair on his head. His finger- and toenails had grown out long and crazily twisted. He sat glowering in the half-lotus posture with a large fired clay statue of a cobra behind him, the hood of which was poised over his head like an umbrella.

The pilgrims passed quickly before him. There was no time for anyone to have more than the briefest look. I had entered with the minister and some other big men who apparently wanted to

have a private talk with the yogi. They stopped the procession of pilgrims and announced their desire to discuss improvements of the pilgrimage site. Bala Yogi simply screamed at them incoherently, sounding like nothing else than a child throwing a temper tantrum. The minister and his friends retreated quickly, and the procession resumed. An attendant asked me to leave.

I went out and stopped at a soft drink shop. There were photographs of Bala Yogi hung on the back wall. I struck up a conversation with the man behind the counter and asked if there were any relatives of Bala Yogi living in this area. “He has three brothers”, the man answered, “and one doesn’t like him. The other two are members of the committee that organizes the pilgrimage services in town.”

I asked for the address of the brother who had rejected Bala Yogi. He lived in the outskirts of Mummidivaram, in the area of the family’s ancestral home. I went there and found him to be an elderly man, retired from active life.

Asked about his brother, he recalled, “One fine morning the boy left home. He went over there where he is now and sat down. He wouldn’t eat, and there was this cobra with him that frightened everybody away. The family used to go there and clap hands from a distance; then he’d send the snake away and we could talk to him. But try as we might, he would not come home. Later on all these people started coming.”

“But what is his goal?” I inquired.

He shrugged. “His purpose is known to him alone. All I know is that he doesn’t like people. He only stayed where is now because the family begged him to not go farther off than he’d done. You see, he was only six years old, and naturally mother and father were quite afraid to lose him. But he never cared for them – his own parents! He certainly doesn’t care for these people who come to worship him now.”

Then I asked, “What do you think about all these people saying he is God or an avatar?” He answered emphatically, “Just because a man has three wives does not make him Dasharatha.” Then he explained that his father had three wives, just as King Dasharatha had. King Dasharatha was the father of Lord Rama. “My father had three wives, like Dasharatha, and he also had four sons, like Dasharatha. But that doesn’t mean that one son must be Rama.”

It appeared that Bala Yogi needed to sit in one place to maintain his powers. There was also a secret about his connection with the cobra that I found out later in the Himalayas. And, though common folk considered him to be God, Bala Yogi himself never made such a claim; indeed, he didn’t seem to care a fig what his devotees thought about him.

After bidding goodbye to the yogi's brother, I went out and sat beneath a tree to think things over. Giving up my worldly life, I had set out to become an accomplished spiritual master, but I knew I needed training. So far I'd seen three well-known masters who were said to be highly advanced. But I found Sai Baba to be a mere caricature. Amma was praiseworthy for her simplicity and dutifulness, but she could not help me in my search; at least she was honest enough to admit it. And this Bala Yogi looked like a grim misanthrope who just sneered at anyone who fell at his feet.

Considering all this, I found myself laughing at how useless my search was proving to be.

But I'd looked for only ten days. I couldn't so quickly give up hope that there was a teacher somewhere out there who was genuine and who could actually help me.

I decided to go to the Himalayas.

[ Editor's Note: The biography ends here and has never been completed. In all likelihood it will never be completed. ]